From Jungle to Social Media: Phenomenon of "Celebrity" Elephants in Tesso Nilo National Park

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Abstract

The conflict between humans and elephants in Indonesia continues to increase due to land expansion and deforestation, forcing elephants to enter residential and agricultural areas. This phenomenon has gained significant attention, particularly through media coverage and social media. This study explores how Instagram shapes public perceptions of elephants in Tesso Nilo National Park using a qualitative approach with phenomenology and virtual ethnography methods. Data is collected through virtual ethnography and phenomenology by observing Instagram content, conducting online interviews, and complementing with offline field observations and interviews around Tesso Nilo to explore how public perceptions are shaped through both digital narratives and real-world interactions. The research reveals that Instagram creates two types of perceptions: physical reality and image. Physical reality presents elephants as animals that require care, feeding, monitoring, and training by Mahouts. Meanwhile, the image built through social media portrays elephants as unique individuals, attracting public attention and sympathy. Some elephants, such as Domang, Tari, and Harmoni, have achieved "celebrity" status due to their interactions with Mahouts, which are frequently shared on Instagram. However, this phenomenon also raises ethical discussions regarding the treatment of elephants, such as the use of chains and Mahout tools. The study highlights that social media can serve as an effective conservation tool by increasing public awareness. At the same time, it provides a platform for criticism and debate about ethical concerns, encouraging further discussion on wildlife welfare.

Keywords: human-animal relationship, mahout, social media, representation, sumatera elephant

Abstrak

Konflik antara manusia dan gajah di Indonesia terus meningkat akibat ekspansi lahan dan perambahan hutan yang menyebabkan gajah memasuki permukiman dan area pertanian. Fenomena ini telah mendapatkan perhatian luas, terutama melalui pemberitaan media dan media sosial. Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana media sosial, khususnya Instagram, membentuk persepsi publik terhadap gajah, khususnya di Taman Nasional Tesso Nilo. Melalui metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologi dan etnografi virtual. Data dikumpulkan melalui teknik etnografi virtual dan perspektif fenomenologi dengan mengamati konten Instagram, melakukan wawancara online, serta dilengkapi dengan observasi lapangan dan wawancara langsung di sekitar Tesso Nilo untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana persepsi publik dibentuk melalui narasi digital dan interaksi nyata. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi representasi gajah sebagai "selebriti" yang dibentuk oleh Mahout dalam unggahan media sosial mereka. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Instagram berperan dalam menciptakan dua jenis persepsi: realitas fisik dan citra. Realitas fisik menggambarkan gajah sebagai hewan yang harus dirawat, diberikan makan, diawasi, dan dilatih, sementara citra yang dibangun melalui media sosial menciptakan narasi gajah sebagai individu dengan karakter unik, yang menarik perhatian dan simpati publik. Beberapa

gajah seperti Domang, Tari, dan Harmoni memperoleh status "selebriti" karena interaksi mereka dengan Mahout yang diunggah ke media sosial, membentuk keterikatan emosional antara pengikut Instagram. Selain itu, fenomena ini juga memunculkan diskusi terkait perlakuan Mahout terhadap gajah. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa media sosial dapat menjadi alat efektif dalam konservasi dengan meningkatkan kesadaran publik tetapi juga membuka ruang bagi kritik dan perdebatan tentang etika perlakuan terhadap satwa liar.
Kata Kunci: *gajah sumatera, human-animal relationship, mahout, media sosial, representasi,*

Introduction

One of the realities of coexistence between humans and elephants is the increasingly complex conflict, particularly in regions where rapid population growth and urbanization have led to human settlements encroaching on elephant habitats. In Indonesia, the island of Kalimantan has witnessed a rise in human-elephant conflicts, with elephants increasingly entering farmlands and residential areas, disrupting local communities' lives and livelihoods (Alfred et al., 2015; Sulistiyono & Handayani, 2019). The conflict between local communities and elephants continues to escalate, as elephants are often perceived as a threat by the public. The following is table 1, which illustrate data conflict between human and elephants

Table 1. Data conflict between human and elephants

Region	Year	Type of Conflict	Human Impact	Elephant Impact	Causes
Tesso Nilo, Riau	2023	Crop raiding	Loss of crops and income for farmers	Stress and injury to elephants	Habitat loss due to illegal logging & palm oil
Way Kambas, Lampung	2022	Elephant enters village	Property damage, human injuries (minor)	Elephant chased, risk of injury	Encroachment of elephant corridors
Aceh	2021	Elephant trapped or killed	Community fear, occasional fatalities	5 elephants killed by poisoning or traps	Human retaliation, shrinking habitat
Bengkulu	2023	Road conflict	Traffic accidents, 1 fatality	2 elephants injured by vehicles	Roads built through elephant migration paths
North Sumatra	2024	Electric fence encounters	Power disruptions, accidental human harm	Elephants electrocuted	Poorly managed conflict mitigation measures

Source : WWF, BKSDA Report

This conflict does not stem from just one side but involves both humans and elephants. From the human perspective, rapid population growth has both direct and indirect impacts on elephant habitats. Activities such as land clearing contribute to the shrinking of elephant habitats, prompting elephants to engage in behaviours that humans see as harmful, such

as damaging cultivated farmland, raiding crops, destroying infrastructure, and even causing injuries or fatalities. Meanwhile, from the elephants' perspective, negative perceptions toward them continue to develop in line with societal, cultural, and economic interests. However, on the other hand, there are also positive perceptions of elephants (Pratiwi et al., 2022).

Online media has a significant role in disseminating information about the conflicts between local communities and elephants, with platforms such as *Kompas.id*, *Mongabay.co.id*, and *Tribunnews.com* frequently report on these issues. These online news outlets have published numerous articles on the topic, particularly between 2020 and 2024. The following is table 2, which illustrates the relationship between communities and elephants as portrayed in online media coverage,

Table 2. Relationship Between Communities and Elephants in Online Media Coverage

Title	Year	Media
In 2020, 180 Human-Wildlife Conflicts Occurred in Aceh	2020	*Kompas.id*
Challenges of Peacefully Coexisting with "Abang Kul," the Sumatran Elephant	2021	*Kompas.id*
Why Is the Human-Elephant Conflict in Aceh So Severe?	2022	*Mongabay.co.id*
Public Outcry Over Elephant-Human Conflict in Pidie, Tangse Residents Demand BKSDA Accountability	2023	*Tribunnews.com*
Human-Elephant Conflict in Jambi: Sumatran Elephants Struggle as Forests Turn into Palm Plantations	2024	*Tribunnews.com*

Source: Compiled from various online news articles on *Kompas.id*, *Mongabay.co.id*, and *Tribunnews.com*

Various online news reports present both positive and negative perspectives on the relationship between humans and elephants. This influences public perception of elephant behavior. According to Cooley (2015), *"Electronic mediation not only makes the transmission of information nearly instant but also greatly extends the perceptual reaches of an individual."* This means that the media itself accelerates the spread of information, and those who receive it may be influenced or even manipulated by the way the news is presented. When it comes to information dissemination, social media platforms have become an integral part of modern life, with Instagram being one of the most widely used and influential. Research shows that pets on Instagram can become *micro-celebrities* by building strong personal brands through visuals and storytelling. These animals create emotional bonds with followers and are often used in brand promotions, making them part of the digital marketing economy (Abidin, 2016, as cited in Lupton, 2023).

Continuing the discussion on the dissemination of information about the phenomenon of "celebrity" elephants, their growing popularity on social media, particularly Instagram, has captured the attention of people from diverse backgrounds (Wu et al., 2020). The term "celebrity" elephant refers to individual elephants that have gained fame in the digital world due to their uniqueness, personality, or compelling stories, which are then documented and shared through various visual content such as photos and videos.

The increasing popularity of "celebrity" elephants is largely influenced by the creativity of content creators, such as the work of Mahout (elephant handler) (Re: hereafter referred to as Mahout) at the Flying Squad location in Tesso Nilo National Park, Riau, who showcase the unique and entertaining aspects of elephant life. Through Instagram, elephant life, which was previously known only through formal documentation, can now be seen from a more personal and emotional perspective. For example, moments of elephants playing, interacting with one another or receiving care from their handlers. This creates an emotional bond between the audience and wildlife, ultimately encouraging more people to care about the fate of elephants and the habitat where they live (Lorimer, 2016).

The process of creating content about elephants by Mahout is carried out routinely through care and feeding activities. Mahout creates content influenced by perceptions and representations of elephants, interactions with other mahouts, and engagement with followers on Instagram. This study seeks to add to the existing body of knowledge by exploring how social media influences the perception and treatment of elephants in conservation contexts, specifically focusing on the case of Tesso Nilo National Park. This, in turn, affects the relationship between elephants and Mahout, even extending to the followers themselves. Based on this explanation, the author unravels the phenomenon of "celebrity" elephants occurring in Tesso Nilo National Park.

Method

This study used a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, drawing on the theory of perception by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the concepts of representation by Stuart Hall. Merleau-Ponty views perception as a foundational, embodied experience — not simply the passive reception of sensory data, but an active process shaped by the body's interaction with the world. He argues that we perceive the world through our *lived body*, meaning that perception is pre-reflective and happens before conscious thought. The body is not an object but a subject that engages with its environment, and through this engagement, meaning is formed.For Merleau-Ponty, perception is intentional and situated

— shaped by one's history, context, and social position. It is through this bodily and contextual experience that individuals make sense of the world around them. In the context of this study, his theory helps to explore how participants' lived experiences shape their understanding and interpretation of their reality, emphasizing the depth and complexity of perception beyond mere visual or sensory input.

This study also focused on both online research (through Instagram) and offline research (conducted in person) by applying the procedures of virtual ethnography. Mahout's activities were not limited to the real world but also extended into the digital space. This procedure examined the landscape of Mahout's activities that emerged both online and offline (Postill, 2016). There were five procedural steps followed in this research (1) Identifying the group actively, (2) Negotiating access, (3) Establishing contact, (4) Conducting interviews both online and offline, (5) Analyzing the research findings (Achmad & et al, 2018). In the procedural steps, the researcher used points (1) and point (2) to identify the Mahout group and obtain permission to access their accounts. There were four Mahouts who served as informants and were deemed suitable for this study based on their active use of Instagram, frequent use of mobile devices for taking photos or recording videos, and active participation in a conservation area. After that, the researcher carried out steps (3) and step (4) to interact and conduct interviews, both online through direct messages or the comment section on Instagram and offline through face-to-face interviews. Next, the researcher conducted an online research analysis using content analysis techniques to examine various content uploaded on each Mahout's Instagram account. The selected Instagram accounts for this study are: @atazuhri, @rimbani77, @tengkuasril, and @eko_pramuji_r76. These accounts were chosen because they belong to individuals who identify as *mahouts* — elephant handlers — and actively share visual and textual content related to their daily interactions with elephants.

However, to confirm the results of this analysis, the researcher also validated them by conducting offline research in the Flying Squad environment at Tesso Nilo National Park.

Results and Discussion

Description From the Jungle to Social Media Instagram

The Emergence of the "Celebrity" Elephant Phenomenon

The phenomenon of celebrity elephants in Tesso Nilo National Park, located in Riau Province, Indonesia, reflects a complex relationship between conservation, human-elephant

conflict, and the emotional appeal of wildlife. Habitat destruction caused by human activities, such as illegal logging, encroachment for palm oil plantations, and infrastructure development, has forced elephants in Tesso Nilo to move closer to areas near human settlements. This situation has led to intense conflicts between humans and elephants, including incidents of crop destruction, economic losses, and threats to the safety of both parties. In this context, certain elephants have become prominent due to their distinctive

One concrete example is the involvement of elephants in conservation patrols or elephants equipped with tracking devices, allowing the public to closely follow their movements and activities. The elephants participating in these patrols have been trained and integrated into the Flying Squad team of the Tesso Nilo Conservation, which aims to help mitigate human-elephant conflicts.

Picture 1. Profile of the Flying Squad Elephants in Tesso Nilo

The Flying Squad team at Tesso Nilo National Park is a strategic effort to address the recurring conflict between humans and wild elephants in the region. This team consists of nine trained elephants, their handlers or mahouts, and conservation officers who work together to guide wild elephant herds back to their natural habitat. By preventing elephants from entering farmlands or residential areas, the Flying Squad helps protect both the safety of local communities and the well-being of wild elephant populations. In conclusion, the presence of this team serves as a frontline initiative in balancing conservation efforts with community protection.

The main approach used by the Flying Squad involves deploying specially trained elephants that are capable of working with humans to manage the movements of wild elephants. These elephants come from a breeding and training program where they are taught to respond to human commands through specific verbal cues or hand gestures. This training process emphasizes the importance of interaction and trust between humans and elephants in building effective cooperation. Therefore, the success of the Flying Squad heavily relies on the strength of the human-elephant bond formed through this training.

The role of mahouts in the Flying Squad is essential, as they are fully responsible for the daily care and monitoring of the elephants under their supervision. Each mahout typically cares for two elephants, and through daily activities such as feeding, bathing, and routine training, a close relationship is developed between the mahout and the elephants. With this bond, mahouts can direct the elephants using the commands they've trained together. Thus, mahouts are not only caretakers but also operational leaders in each of the Flying Squad's field missions.

In addition to the collaboration between mahouts and elephants, the Flying Squad program also involves local communities in conflict mitigation efforts. Residents are given training to help manage conflict and to understand the importance of elephant conservation. This involvement not only strengthens the program's short-term success but also promotes long-term sustainability through active, environmentally aware public support. As a result, the strength of the Flying Squad lies in its inclusive approach, combining wildlife conservation with community empowerment.

Several mahouts in the Flying Squad team also serve as key informants who share their activities online, particularly through social media like Instagram. Tengku Asril, known by the handle @tengku.asril, is responsible for Kalista Lestari (Tari) and Lisa. Ata Zuhri, using the handle @atazuhri, cares for Ria and Domang. Junjung Daulay, under the account @rimbani77, also cares for Kalista Lestari and Lisa. Meanwhile, Eko Pramuji, through the account @eko_pramuji_r76, is responsible for Harmoni and Rimbo. These mahouts not only play vital roles in the field but also serve as bridges between conservation efforts and the public through the digital content they share. Therefore, their dual roles extend the impact of the Flying Squad into the digital sphere, raising awareness and fostering emotional connections between the public and the elephants of Tesso Nilo.

With the advancement of social media, Mahouts utilize digital mobile devices equipped with various features and applications, including photography, video recording, and the Instagram platform, to share their daily activities in caring for elephants. These activities include collecting food, guiding elephants into the forest to forage (*angon*), bathing them, and monitoring their health. The activities performed by Mahouts are uploaded to social media in the form of visual content and narratives. However, before posting, all content must first go through the official Tesso Nilo Conservation account (@btn_tessonilo) before being shared on their personal accounts. This is in accordance with an unwritten regulation regarding the procedure for uploading content on Instagram. As stated by @atazuhri:

"In my opinion, it helps, but I don't know the official policy of the conservation office. We are allowed to post, but it has to go through the conservation office first. Personally, I don't want to because I also want to share content based on my own perspective. But since it's already a rule, I have no choice." (Interview, October 28, 2024).

Posts on the @btn_tessonilo account showcase information about conservation activities, such as Flying Squad patrols, monitoring of wild elephants, and rescue stories of injured elephants. Through engaging narratives and touching images or videos, these posts successfully attract the attention of followers on Instagram, raising awareness about the challenges faced by elephants in the area. Additionally, the personal social media accounts of Mahouts play a crucial role in humanizing the stories of elephants in Tesso Nilo. Posts from @btn_tessonilo and the Mahouts' Instagram accounts illustrate the dynamics of interactions in both the real and digital worlds.

Who Are the "Celebrity" Elephants?

Mahouts play a vital role in educating the public about elephants. This education is not limited to visitors at Tesso Nilo National Park but reaches a wider audience through Instagram, where narratives, photos, and videos are shared. These posts allow the public to engage with and learn about elephants from a distance. Social media serves as a bridge for Mahouts to showcase their daily activities and visually present the lives of elephants. This is further supported by the posts from each informant, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Content Analysis of Mahout Flying Squad Tesso Nilo on Instagram

Mahout	Topic and Content-Type	Number of Likes
@atazuhri	Togetherness of Domang and Mahout (Video)	2,290
@rimbani77	The togetherness of Tari and Mahout (Video)	232
@tengku.asril	The togetherness of Tari and Mahout (Video)	242
@eko_pramuji_r76	The togetherness of Harmoni and Mahout (Video)	217

Source: Processed Data

The data in Table 2, which analyzes the content of Mahout Flying Squad Tesso Nilo informants, focuses on the bond between Mahouts and the elephants under their care. The data presents the posts with the highest number of likes from each informant's account. @atazuhri received the highest number of likes, totaling 2,290, for a post featuring his interaction with Domang. This was followed by @tengku.asril, @rimbani77, and @eko_pramuji_r76. Each Mahout's account highlights a particular elephant that draws the attention of their followers, including Domang, Kalista Lestari (Tari), Indro, and Harmoni.

Comments from followers also reflect their engagement and concern for the elephants. Below is one of the comments from a follower of @atazuhri,

> @ikhlash_hasan: Domaaang
> @nimade.aryani: Enjoy your meal, Brother Domang. Have you prayed before eating? 😊

One of the comments from followers reflects their admiration and affection for Domang. The interaction between followers and Mahouts also occurs in the videos uploaded by the Mahouts. Some followers even use the love emoji as an expression of affection for Domang. Domang, Tari, and Harmoni are Sumatran elephants that have garnered significant attention from followers, particularly through visual content showcasing their bond with the Mahouts. All three elephants are also featured on the official @btn_tessonilo account, where they have received considerable attention. Domang appeared in approximately 27 posts, Tari in 6 posts, and Rimbani in 4 posts between October 1 and November 30, 2024. Mahouts refer to them as "celebrity elephants." This was stated by @rimbani77 in a discussion about celebrity elephants,

> *"On Instagram, the most popular ones are three, sir—Domang, Tari, and Harmoni. There's one more, Imbo, and Indro also often get attention. Domang is the celebrity elephant here, sir. Netizens are always waiting for Domang and Tari as well."* (Interview, October 29, 2024).

This is also supported by a comment from a follower on a post from Friday, October 4, 2024, which featured a video of Domang trying to charm his mother to avoid being scolded, gently stroking her. In the video, his mother responds with a forgiving gesture, despite Domang being covered in mud after playing.

> fariedjuly: Will Tari marry Domang? They look perfect together
> btn_tessonilo replied: That's still a long way to go, bro They're still just kids. We don't know who their match will be—it's already written in Lauhul Mahfudz

Indirectly, comments from followers indicate their attention toward Domang and Tari. Domang is four years old, while Tari is two years old. Mahouts create content in the form of photos or videos with two main themes: elephant-Mahout activities and the behaviour of Domang, Tari, and Harmoni in their daily routines. To share these moments, Mahouts use Instagram Reels (short edited videos) and upload them to their respective accounts.

Perception of the Elephant-Mahout Relationship

The use of digital technology, particularly social media, within the national park environment has transformed the way interactions take place in this new space and how the relationship between Mahouts and elephants is documented. Documentation through photos, videos, and narratives is not merely about sharing stories but also about sharing experiences (Lupton, 2023). In the case of "celebrity" elephants, the relationship between Mahouts and elephants involves two layers of perception: the Mahout's perception of physical reality and their perception of images (Merleau-Ponty, 2015).

Perception of Physical Reality

Physical reality refers to an objective state experienced by humans, independent of perception and interpretation (Merleau-Ponty, 2015). In the context of elephant existence, its physical reality is perceived by Mahouts as elephants being living beings with a body (size, skin texture, sound), behaviors, biological needs, and their very presence. The Mahouts' perception in this case is that elephants are animals that must be cared for, fed, and monitored. This perception of physical reality shapes the daily activities performed by Mahouts. Some of the key activities carried out by the Flying Squad Mahouts in Tesso Nilo include: (1) Guiding the elephants to forage (*angon*), (2) Monitoring their movements, (3) Providing food and ensuring their health, (4) Bathing the elephants, (5) Conducting patrols

First, *angon* is an activity carried out by Mahouts to herd elephants. This activity is performed by guiding or riding the elephants to chosen areas within Tesso Nilo National Park, where grass and edible plants are available for them. The elephants' legs are chained in accordance with the procedures set by the Tesso Nilo National Park Authority. This activity involves Mahouts, who are responsible for the care of the elephants under their supervision. This was explained by informant @eko_pramujie_r76, who shared insights about the angon practice,

> *"The routine actually starts in the morning at 8:00 AM with caring for the elephants, moving them to the river, and letting them forage (angon) for about an hour. We find a spot with plenty of grass to tie them. Then, we return here to take care of the camp and its cleanliness. Around 3:00 or 3:30 PM, we go back there to check on the elephants. That's our daily routine."* (Interview, October 29, 2024).

Angon is an essential activity in a Mahout's routine, helping elephants navigate feeding routes. According to the informant, after the elephants are guided to forage (*angon*) and their legs are secured with chains, they are left in the designated area.

The second activity is monitoring the elephants, which is carried out by Mahouts. This task is conducted 24 hours a day. The Mahouts are responsible for their assigned elephants work from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM (Western Indonesia Time). After that, the supervision is handed over to the Mahouts on duty for the night shift. The night shift is assigned to two Mahouts at a time. Their monitoring duties focus on the foraging activity, the surrounding environment of the Flying Squad area, the condition of the food supply, and the health of the elephants.

The third activity involves feeding the elephants, which consists of main food and supplementary food, as well as health checkups by veterinarians. The main food for the elephants in the Flying Squad at Tesso Nilo National Park is grass, while their supplementary food includes banana stems, banana leaves, and coconut fronds, which are sourced from nearby community farms. This type of supplementary food aligns with the feeding preferences of elephants which states that besides grass, elephants also enjoy banana leaves, banana stems, sugarcane, pineapples, and papayas. Supplements are given to elephants under certain conditions, such as illness, old age, exhaustion after intense work, or malnutrition. In the Flying Squad, elephant health management covers several key aspects, including routine care, examination methods, preventive measures, disease treatment, common illnesses, and available healthcare facilities.

The fourth activity involves bathing the elephants, which is done once a day to help keep their skin moist, resistant to insect bites, free from parasites, and for relaxation. The elephants in Tesso Nilo have the option of being bathed either in the river within the Tesso Nilo Conservation area or in an artificial pool at the Flying Squad facility.

Picture 2. Elephant Bathing Activities in the River and Artificial Pool at Tesso Nilo

The fifth activity involves patrolling, which is carried out by trained elephants and Mahouts. These three trained elephants assist Mahouts in detecting illegal poaching, protecting the conservation area, and mitigating human-elephant conflicts. These patrols are not conducted daily but when requested by the Tesso Nilo National Park Authority. During patrols, Mahouts ride the elephants to navigate the conservation forest, as trained elephants are capable of traversing difficult terrain within the protected area.

Based on the explanation of the five activities carried out by Mahouts with the elephants, the elephants in the Flying Squad Tesso Nilo area are understood as physical reality, meaning they are perceived as animals that must be cared for, monitored, and fed. The discussion of elephants being ridden by handlers or Mahouts is also addressed by Shell (2018) in "The Role of Elephants in Modern Conflicts and Historical Wars: A Logistic Perspective". The study discusses the use of elephants as a means of transportation for mobility and carrying modern weapon logistics during the Kachin conflict in Northern Burma. Elephants function as working animals and assist humans once they have been properly trained. This perception of physical reality regarding elephants is also expressed by informant @rimbani77, who stated:

> *"At first, I worked here just to earn money, but over time, after interacting with them and riding them during patrols, I started to see elephants as animals that help in our lives."* (Interview, October 29, 2024).

Based on the interview excerpt from informant @rimbani77, the perception of elephants as a physical reality is that they are seen as animals that help Mahouts in carrying out activities within the Tesso Nilo environment. The relationship between them is a biological relationship, characterized by mutual dependence and cooperation in performing daily activities (Haraway, 2016).

Perception of Image

Physical reality cannot be fully grasped by human perception. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2015) in *Phenomenology of Perception*, human perception of the world (including elephants) is always bound to the human body's experience, which acts as a filter for understanding reality. When a human sees an elephant, they do not fully "become" the elephant in its physical reality. Instead, they perceive the elephant through their own human perception, shaped by various social and cultural contexts (Fudge, 2022; Haraway, 2016).

According to Hall (2017), image is a process of representation influenced by language, media, and culture. An image is a construction that carries meaning based on its social and cultural context. In this context, image is closely related to power. Those in power control the media, determining what is presented to the public. An image can change over time, influenced by economic and political discourse. In a world increasingly dominated by social media, images have become more fluid and dynamic, as social media allows more actors to participate in shaping the representation of a phenomenon. Therefore, an image is not just about what is presented to the public but also reveals the power dynamics involved in shaping public understanding.

The phenomenon of "celebrity" elephants in the Flying Squad of Tesso Nilo National Park can be understood through the theoretical framework of perception by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Stuart Hall's concept of representation. Elephants in the Flying Squad are not only perceived as living beings in their natural habitat within the framework of physical reality but also as part of a narrative produced by various actors within the context of social media. This means that humans do not merely see elephants as part of the wild jungle but also as subjects with specific roles in human life (Aziz & Sukmani, 2024). The existence of these elephants is not solely determined by physical reality but is also shaped by media representations (Bertram & Vivier, 2021).

Mahouts have a crucial role in creating visual content that they share from activities. Each Mahout has a unique experience in perceiving and representing elephants that are considered celebrities, such as Domang, Tari, and Harmoni, on social media. Mahout @atazuhri actively uses his mobile phone to record videos, take photos, and write narratives about Domang and his mother, Ria. He takes advantage of *angon* time to capture moments of Domang and Ria. Mahout @atazuhri gains experience through actions and sensory involvement. When these experiences are later shared on social media, he represents Domang as a cheerful child and Ria as a patient mother. This perspective was expressed by @atazuhri regarding representation,

> *"For me, they are like my second family. When I talk to them, it might look silly, but that's the daily sensation I experience. I mostly tell them to bathe, eat, and play."* (Interview, October 28, 2024).

This representation is constructive. The image built between Mahout @atazuhri, Domang, and Ria is an experience that introduces them as a cheerful and patient elephant

duo, based on Mahout's perception as well as the followers' perception. Followers engage with this experience through photos or videos, even though it has already been mediated by Instagram. Followers who have no physical experience with elephants still develop an emotional attachment. This is reflected in Mahout @atazuhri's posts about Domang, along with captions (a feature on Instagram that includes text or narratives to complement photos or videos).
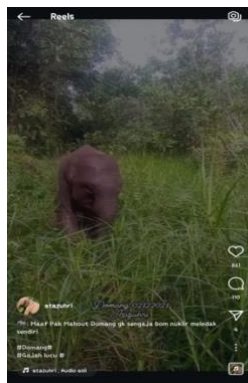
Picture 3. Instagram Reels Video of Domang Passing Gas While Eating Grass

Mahout @atazuhri wrote a caption: "Sorry, Mr. Mahout, Domang accidentally set off a nuclear bomb on his own. At that moment, Domang was passing gas while being recorded, which made Mahout laugh. This moment was enjoyed by followers, who commented as follows: @puspacamellya: Aaaah, yesterday Mr. Atta farted too… uggh, fresh air! (laughing emoji)) @cemongfamily1: Mr. Atta, do you know… farting is 100 points for health! If you can't fart, your stomach feels uncomfortable. The followers' responses reflect socially mediated interactions. Even though their physical bodies do not directly "become" part of the physical reality, they can still experience emotional engagement with the content. Domang has the highest engagement record among the other elephants, with an average of 12,719 interactions per post, including likes, comments, and shares on Instagram. This number indicates a growing interest among followers in the interaction between Mahout, Domang, and Ria, as well as in the behavior of the two elephants. At the same time, this level of engagement extends the perceptual experience to followers, further strengthening the representation of elephants as "celebrities."

Another aspect highlighted in @rimbani77's post is the use of leg chains and a *gancu* (a specialized hook stick) for communicating with elephants. Some followers of @rimbani77 commented on this practice, expressing their concerns. However, @rimbani77 provided an explanation, stating that the use of chains and *gancu* follow official procedures set by the

park authority and serves as a communication and command tool for handling the elephants. As explained by @rimbani77 regarding the use of chains and *gancu*,

> *"Some people often ask why the elephants' legs are chained, and that's where we provide education. We use it when an elephant is in a bad mood or being stubborn, but it's not used every day, and we can't use it carelessly. This method is standard practice for all elephant handlers, whether in PLG (Elephant Training Center), KSDA, or zoos. As for the gancu, it cannot be completely removed. In the past, we openly showed it, but now we keep it hidden, that was one of the suggestions from netizens."* (Interview, October 29, 2024).

The use of chains is a safety procedure for both Mahouts and elephants. Meanwhile, the *gancu* is used as a communication tool during various activities. However, some followers feel uncomfortable with the use of the *gancu* and have suggested that @rimbani77 avoid displaying it on Mahout's Instagram account. This representation creates diverse perceptions, as Mahouts construct images through Instagram, generating complex discussions, including comments, criticism, and suggestions about the ethics of handling elephants, such as the use of chains and *gancu*. Nonetheless, Mahouts also have knowledge of ethical practices in working with elephants (Chowdhury et al., 2022). They follow accounts related to elephant interactions from India, Indonesia, and Thailand. This was explained by @rimbani77, who stated:

> *"I follow several accounts about elephants because I also learn from them, like those in Thailand and Way Kambas, on how to care for elephants. Coincidentally, I also had the opportunity to learn offline in India. There, elephants are treated differently. They are cared for but also used to make money. Elephants are put to work, carrying wood for commercial purposes. Maybe it is because there are many elephants there, unlike here."* (Interview, October 30, 2024).

The interaction between Mahouts and elephants varies in different regions. In India, elephants are cared for but also put to work and used for entertainment purposes (Dobson et al., 2020). Mahouts at Tesso Nilo National Park are also given the opportunity by the park authority to visit India, Thailand, and other conservation sites, including Way Kambas, to observe the relationship between Mahouts and elephants in different settings. These experiences affect the Mahouts' decisions on what kind of elephant-related content to upload, particularly regarding ethical treatment.

The Tesso Nilo Conservation Authority has a significant role in deciding which content created by Mahouts can be uploaded. After producing the content, Mahouts must submit it to the authority for approval before posting. Once approved, the post is uploaded using the collaboration feature, tagging the Mahout's account, while the Mahout themselves carry out the upload. Mahouts are not only responsible for handling elephants but also serve as active Instagram users who share information about the relationship between elephants and Mahouts as well as the varied behaviors of elephants. This content is shaped by their own perceptions, filtered through the reactions of followers, and approved for upload by the Tesso Nilo National Park Authority. Both personal Instagram accounts and the official @btn_tessonilo account function as spaces that connect the direct experiences of Mahouts with the indirect experiences of followers. This interaction on social media has contributed to the emergence of "celebrity" elephants such as Domang, Tari, and Harmoni, who are not only present in the Flying Squad environment but also have a presence on social media (Gogoi, 2021; Nash & Singh, 2019).

Conclusion

This study reveals how Instagram functions as a platform that shapes and mediates public perceptions of elephants, particularly those in the Flying Squad team at Tesso Nilo National Park. By analyzing content created by Mahouts, it becomes evident that their portrayal of elephants extends beyond physical interactions and into the realm of digital storytelling. Using Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, the research distinguishes between two forms of perception: physical reality perception, where elephants are understood in terms of their biological and behavioral attributes, and image perception, where they are framed as media personas shaped by social narratives on Instagram.

A key strength of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining phenomenological theory with digital ethnography. By applying Merleau-Ponty's framework, the study offers a nuanced understanding of how Mahouts interact with elephants both in their physical environment and in curated digital spaces. Furthermore, the research highlights how elephants like Domang, Tari, and Harmoni become "celebrity" figures, demonstrating the power of social media to construct new meanings around wildlife and conservation work. This dual perception enriches the discussion around human-animal relationships in the digital age.

However, the research has certain limitations. It focuses primarily on Mahouts' perspectives and does not deeply explore the viewpoints of other stakeholders such as park

authorities, conservationists, or Instagram followers. Additionally, while the study offers qualitative insight, it lacks a broader quantitative analysis of engagement metrics or audience reception, which could further strengthen its conclusions. Future research might explore these angles to provide a more comprehensive picture of the impact of digital representation on conservation practices.

Suggestions

Based on the discussion, the author provides the following suggestions for future research development: (1) This study examines how Mahouts with Instagram accounts play a role in shaping the image of elephants. However, the study has not yet addressed the aspect of objectification, where elephants are continuously presented as objects on social media, potentially leading to followers being exclusively interested in the elephants and not in other related aspects, (2) This study creates opportunities for collaboration across various disciplines to explore the "celebrity" elephant phenomenon from a broader perspective.

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