



BEHIND THE SCENES OF ANONYMOUS: POWER MECHANISMS AND ONLINE PROSTITUTION PRACTICES ON MICHAT

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ABSTRACT

The development of digital technology has created new interaction spaces that enable online prostitution, one of which is through the MiChat application. The anonymity and people nearby features make it easier for users to interact without clear identities, creating a loophole for covert sexual transactions. This research uses a critical paradigm with a qualitative approach through interviews, digital observation, and document analysis to understand how anonymity operates as a mechanism of power. The results show that coded language such as "ST/LT," "Open BO," and "300 up" are used to disguise transactions, while the application's algorithm reinforces power relations through account visibility. Social factors such as economic pressure, a consumptive lifestyle, and low digital literacy contribute to increasing adolescent vulnerability. In conclusion, online prostitution on the MiChat application is not only the result of individual abuse, but also the result of the interaction between technological design, anonymity, and social structures that support exploitative practices in the digital space.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of communication and information technology in the digital era has brought fundamental changes to various aspects of life, from social, economic, cultural, to political. The ease with which people can access, produce, and distribute information has made technology a new space that shapes global social interaction patterns without the constraints of space and time. A report by We Are Social and Hootsuite shows that internet users increased from 4.2 billion in 2018 to 5.1 billion in 2022, while social media users increased from 3.4 billion to 4.7 billion in the same year (Cindy Mutia Annur, 2022). In Indonesia, there were 167 million social media users as of January 2023, equivalent to 60.4% of the population (We Are Social, 2023).

The growth of internet and social media users is dominated by the productive age group, particularly those aged 18–34, who are key players in shaping contemporary digital culture (katadata.co.id). This indicates that the younger generation is the group most exposed to the dynamics of virtual space, including the risk of misusing technology for negative practices such as cybercrime and online prostitution.

One application that has received significant attention in Indonesia is MiChat, a communication platform designed with interactive features such as People Nearby and Random Chat. As of October 2022, MiChat recorded 114,300 global users, with 83.73% of them from Indonesia, making Indonesia the country with the largest number of MiChat users in the world (Cindy Mutia Annur, 2022). The dominant age group for users is 18–34, the most digitally active group.

MiChat, despite being promoted as a general communication app, has received a negative stigma due to its misuse for online prostitution. Several criminal cases reinforce this perception, such as the sexual transaction case that

resulted in the death of a police officer in Bali (DetikBali, 2022) and the arrest of a 17-year-old teenager on suspicion of selling a 15-year-old girl to lecherous men through the MiChat app (CNN Indonesia, 2024). These criminal patterns demonstrate how the app's anonymity, ease of communication, and lack of identity verification open up space for difficult-to-detect illegal activity.

Technological advances have indeed created new social environments that unconsciously shape individual behavior (Laukon et al., 2024). The technological determinism perspective asserts that technology is not simply a neutral tool, but rather an entity that influences how humans think, act, and interact. In this context, MiChat becomes a medium that not only facilitates communication but also shapes new patterns of social relations, including the power relations that operate in online prostitution practices.

In anonymous communication spaces, identities can be obscured, relationships can be renegotiated, and actions can be undertaken with lower social risk. Technology becomes a means of enabling actors to conduct controlled self-presentations, creating hyper-personal communication (Walther in Thurlow, 2004) and opening up opportunities for hidden sexual transactions. Anonymity creates new forms of power: the power to conceal identity, manipulate perceptions, and dominate others through information, economic rewards, or fabricated self-representations.

In a critical approach to technology, Feenberg (2012) explains that technological design always embodies certain values and interests that shape the social relationships of its users. MiChat, through its features, creates an interaction space that facilitates patterns of sexual transactions, exploitation, and even fraud. Marcuse (2015) adds that modern technology produces one-dimensional humans, individuals controlled by false needs constructed by digital capitalism. In the context of MiChat, the personalized algorithms, suggestive advertising, and sexual content that appear in digital spaces create an environment that encourages consumerist, hedonistic behavior, and in some cases, leads to online prostitution.

PPATK data reveals more than 130,000 transactions related to child prostitution and pornography, with a turnover of Rp127 billion, involving 24,000 children aged 10–18 (Sutrisna, 2024). This phenomenon demonstrates how power relations in online prostitution are not only related to personal relationships but also to a digital economic system that trades bodies as commodities.

Thus, the practice of online prostitution on MiChat is not merely a moral or criminal issue, but also a question of power mechanisms that operate through anonymity and technological design, digital economic relations, and social structures. Technology creates a space that brings together economic needs, social pressures, and anonymous identities, allowing online prostitution to occur covertly yet massively. Examining these dynamics is crucial to understanding how power operates "behind the scenes of anonymity" and how digital applications like MiChat play a role in shaping complex cyber practices in contemporary society.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a critical paradigm, with a qualitative approach, the research aims to understand in depth how anonymity in the MiChat application operates as a power mechanism that facilitates the practice of online prostitution. This approach allows researchers to explore interaction patterns, communication strategies, and the experiences of the parties involved in it. Research data is obtained through primary data and secondary data, primary data collection is conducted through interviews with informants who have knowledge, experience, or direct involvement in the issue of online prostitution, such as law enforcement officers, women's and children's protection agencies, and parties who understand the dynamics of MiChat use, while secondary data is obtained from media reports, previous research, and analysis of digital content related to the use of the MiChat application.

In addition to interviews, researchers also conducted participant observation in relevant digital spaces, particularly the people nearby feature and anonymous chats commonly used for sexual transactions. Observations were conducted by creating MiChat accounts and tracing user communication patterns, from the use of codes, images, and symbols to the forms of bargaining that emerged in conversations. This approach provides a direct view of how anonymity operates in digital interactions and how power relations are formed within them. To strengthen the findings, this study also used source triangulation techniques, namely comparing information from various external and internal informants from related institutions, as well as examining various digital sources such as news websites, social media, and scientific publications on online prostitution.

The data analysis process in this study follows the Miles and Huberman (1994) model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Analysis was conducted from the data collection stage until all data was collected. During interviews, researchers directly examined informants' responses to identify initial patterns or categories related to power mechanisms, the use of anonymity features, and the forms of exploitation that occurred. The results of digital observations and interviews were then combined to produce a comprehensive understanding of how technology, anonymity, and social dynamics in MiChat interrelate in supporting online prostitution practices.



Thus, this research method not only describes the phenomenon but also uncovers the power structures and relations hidden behind the anonymous screen of this digital platform.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The research shows that the technical design of the MiChat app, from registration requiring only a phone number to the people nearby feature, creates a communication space that is easily accessible but difficult to track. Users can create accounts without clearly identifying themselves, using blurry photos, cartoons, or symbols, and random names that don't refer to their real identities.

This feature is technically designed to make it easier for people to find new friends or interact with strangers in their area. However, in practice, this feature is also widely used as a gateway for sexual transactions. This situation can be seen in the many accounts that include certain symbols, codes, or words as open markers for "open Bo" or similar services. In the people nearby feature, many profiles include keywords such as "ST/LT," "500/1.5 JT/hour," or "VCS/Credit 100/1 hour, or other suggestive phrases as markers of sexual transactions. This shows that anonymity is not just a privacy protector, but a technological foundation that enables online prostitution to occur covertly on MiChat (Dadang Dwi Septiyan, 2024).

Behind the anonymous screen, power mechanisms operate through the mastery of symbols and the use of digital systems. Those who understand coded language, such as "Open BO," "ST/LT," "300 up," or "VCS," hold a more dominant position in communication networks than unskilled users. The MiChat app's algorithm, which displays accounts based on location and activity, also creates new power relations: the most active and nearby accounts have a greater chance of appearing on the "People Nearby" list and attracting customers.

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In the digital space, who we are is defined by what we present, not by who we truly are. For example, a child can disguise himself as an adult, a pimp can pose as a client, and a user can disguise himself as a sex worker through photos and text. This way, others' perceptions of us can be completely manipulated, making technology an extension of our social image, shaping impressions and interactions controlled by the user.

Furthermore, the slang code and the MiChat application as sexual transactions are extensions of the human symbolic system. This means that humans create and use certain symbols or codes to convey veiled messages in the illegal or sensitive context of online prostitution. Technology not only acts as a communication medium but also gives rise to a form of veiled language. This language is designed to be understood only by those involved, while simultaneously disguising the true activity. Vulgar or straightforward terms are replaced with codes that sound neutral or ordinary, but have special meaning in certain communications.

Interviews with the KPAD and Satpol PP showed that online prostitutes consciously manipulate this feature, for example by frequently changing phone numbers, falsifying ages, and using other people's phones to break the digital evidence trail (Wirdayani, 2025; Nia, 2025). Field data and reports from institutions such as the KPAI and KPAD show that online prostitution practices on MiChat cannot be separated from socio-economic factors: economic pressures, a consumptive lifestyle, weak parental supervision, and low digital literacy in children (Nia, 2025).

Children and adolescents are often tempted by the lure of hundreds of thousands to millions of rupiah to fulfill their lifestyle, hang out at cafes, or buy gadgets. As quoted from interviews sourced from the Pontianak City KPAD explains, children are often driven by lifestyles that are beyond their means. For example, hanging out at a cafe requires around Rp. 50,000, while the average junior high school student's pocket money is only Rp. 20,000. This difference makes children feel pressured to find quick ways to earn money. Difficult situations occur when there are family problems, such as parental divorce, which leaves children without a place to rely on. In Marcuse's context, this can be seen from the perspective of false needs, namely hanging out at cafes or following a certain lifestyle is not a basic need, but something formed from consumer culture and reinforced by digital media. Children feel compelled to follow it to be accepted in their circle of friends. This condition clearly indicates social alienation. Children from troubled families tend to seek escape in the digital world, where the relationships they build are often illusory.

In Marcuse's false needs framework, digital technology and culture instill false needs that lead to the body being treated as a commodity to be traded in virtual spaces (Marcuse, 1964). MiChat, with its anonymity and geolocation features, becomes an extension of the logic of digital capitalism, where social, power, and economic relations converge in invisible yet tangible forms. Organized and recurring online prostitution primarily targets vulnerable groups such as women and children.

The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) findings align with the latest data collected by the Regional Child Protection Agency (KPAD). While the KPAI highlighted the high number of cases of sexual exploitation and child trafficking, many of which occur online, the KPAD noted various forms of child abuse in the field that are no less serious. This KPAD data provides a more detailed picture of the types of cases involving children in Pontianak City between January and June 2025.



Figure 1. Data on the number of sexual crime cases from January to June 2025

Source: Pontianak City KPAD

The following pie chart shows data on cases handled by the Regional Child Protection Commission (KPAD) from January to June 2025, with a total of 94 cases. The largest number of cases is children in conflict with the law (ABH), with 46 cases, or almost half (49%), indicating that many children are caught up in legal cases. Sexual crimes are in second place with 23 cases (24%), a fairly high number and indicating that sexual violence against children remains a serious problem.

Physical violence was recorded as many as 7 cases (7%), child neglect as many as 4 cases (4%), NAPZA (narcotics, psychotropics, and addictive substances) and education protection each 3 cases (3%), health protection and custody each 2 cases (2%), and other smaller cases, each only 1 case (1%), namely children with special needs (ABK), civil rights, psychological violence, and economic protection. Thus the picture above shows that almost half of the children's problems handled by KPAD are children in conflict with the law, a quarter of which are related to sexual crimes, the rest are spread across cases of violence, neglect, education, and other child protection issues.

However, it's important to understand that technology isn't the sole cause. Social factors such as economic pressure, weak parental supervision, and a permissive digital culture also play a significant role in making children and adolescents vulnerable to misusing this feature. Without these social factors, technology doesn't automatically lead to online prostitution. In fact, the people nearby feature can also be used for positive purposes, such as finding new friends, building local business networks, or simply expanding friendships. As Marcuse criticized, even seemingly neutral technology operates within market logic. Features originally designed to connect people end up creating false needs, reinforcing social isolation, and facilitating exploitation in the digital space.

From a critical perspective, this aligns with Marcuse's view that technology is not a neutral tool, but rather a medium that regulates visibility, directs behavior, and produces new forms of power in digital spaces (Marcuse, 1964). This phenomenon demonstrates the existence of false needs. The privacy and instant connection offered by the MiChat application create the illusion that meeting strangers quickly is an important need. In fact, the false needs created by



technology actually open up opportunities for negative behavior. Furthermore, this feature also produces social alienation. People are more comfortable building anonymous relationships in digital spaces than in the real world, so that interactions lose their sense of depth and only focus on momentary interests. From the perspective of technological determinism, it is clear that the design of the MiChat feature is not neutral, where the features of surrounding users also direct social behavior patterns by accelerating the process of meetings and transactions.

4. CONCLUSION

The anonymity of the MiChat app is the foundation that allows online prostitution to operate covertly. The ease of creating anonymous accounts, along with the people nearby feature, creates instant meeting spaces that are difficult to detect. Coded language such as "ST/LT," "300 up," and "open BO" indicate that anonymity has become the foundation of online prostitution.

Behind this anonymity, power relations are formed through the mastery of symbols and the use of the app's algorithms. Active and geographically close profiles are more easily found by potential customers. Perpetrators also utilize digital strategies such as changing phone numbers or using other people's phones to erase their tracks, demonstrating that the technology in MiChat is not a neutral tool but rather contributes to shaping behavior.

This phenomenon aligns with Marcuse's concept of false needs, where technology creates false needs and a false sense of security that makes anonymous interactions seem normal. Simultaneously, social factors such as economic pressure, a consumerist lifestyle, poor digital literacy, and parental supervision make children and adolescents increasingly vulnerable to involvement. MiChat demonstrates how technology and social conditions converge to facilitate exploitation in the digital space.

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