

Public Legitimacy of Management Dismissal Decisions in the Social Media Era: The Viral Case of “Anita Tumbler”

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze how digital public reactions play a role in shaping the social legitimacy of management decisions to terminate employees in the social media era, using the viral case study of "Anita Tumbler." This research starts from the assumption that the legitimacy of termination decisions is no longer solely determined by formal organizational procedures. This study used a qualitative approach through content analysis of comments from netizens on social media related to the case, as well as document analysis of the company's official response. Data were analyzed using NVivo 12 software to identify dominant themes, patterns of public reactions, and organizational legitimacy. The results indicate that public reactions in the digital space were dominated by public anger, moral judgment, justification of punishment, and ridicule. These patterns collectively construct a normative narrative that legitimizes the termination decision as a socially acceptable action. The findings also reveal that the legitimacy of termination decisions is shaped by public opinion and emotional responses in the digital space rather than solely through legal grounds or formal procedures. This study emphasizes the importance of balancing the protection of employee freedom of expression with professional obligations in the use of social media. In the era of social media, HR is not only required to be able to respond to public pressure, but also to consider the proportionality of sanctions, the long-term impact on individuals, and justice mechanisms that protect both parties, namely the organization and the employees themselves.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology and the massive use of social media have changed the way people interpret social events, including cases of employee dismissal. Social media has become an inseparable communication space from modern people's lives, both in the personal and professional realms (Ohara, 2023; Alwuqaysi, 2025). Professional groups in this case are groups of employees in the modern era who use social media as a place for social interaction to become a space to express opinions. Employee activity on social media is getting more attention because the digital footprint left behind has the potential to affect an individual's professional image as well as the reputation of the organization where the employee works (Ahmad et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2022).

Along with the increasing use of social media, various phenomena have emerged where – individual content or behavior in the digital space has a direct impact on work relationships and managerial decision-making. Posts that are personal in nature can quickly become public consumption, triggering a widespread reaction and developing into social pressure on the organization (Carr et al., 2023). This condition shows that digital communication is no longer

private, but is in a public supervision space that actively assesses, comments, and even demands responses from institutions.

One of the cases that shows this phenomenon is the case known as "Anita Tumbler", which involved an employee of an insurance company. Anita Dewi, who is famous for her uploads on social media related to the loss of a tumbler on the KRL Commuter Line and went viral (Zaki, 2025). The upload triggered a wave of public reaction in the form of criticism, ridicule, anger, and moral judgment from netizens. The intensity of the massive public reaction then led to the decision to dismiss the company, which also sparked a debate about the imposition of sanctions and the role of public pressure in the company's management decisions.

The development of digital technology has an impact on the implementation of Human Resource Management (HRM), especially in managing employee behavior on social media. Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory explains that the success of an organization is not only determined by the owner or management, but also by various stakeholders who have interests, influences, or are affected by the organization's activities and decisions (Freeman et al, 2010). In the digital era, the public social media has become an increasingly strong stakeholder because it is able to quickly shape opinions, reputations and organizational legitimacy. According to April Yue, (2022) Organizations are now facing an increasingly complex situation when employee uploads trigger the public spotlight and potentially affect the organization's image. In these conditions, public pressure that develops in real time often encourages management to make quick decisions to maintain the company's reputation. However, the decision is in a dilemmatic position because it must balance organizational interests, individual privacy rights, ethical norms, and public moral demands.

Some research (Cornish, 2022; Murto & Korpisaari, 2025; Hosain et al., 2025) has discussed the impact of social media on the organization's reputation and employee conduct policies. Research Hartnick, (2024) in the Southern African region stated that some employees were unfairly dismissed due to social media violations that occurred outside the workplace. Furthermore, in (Pekkala & van Zoonen, 2022; Hesse et al., 2022; Carr et al., 2023) research, the reputation of employees and organizations is influenced by employees' personal social media content. Meanwhile, Robards & Graf, (2022) in their research found hundreds of cases of employees being fired for posting on social media in the form of discrimination, political content, harassment, violence, and conflict in the workplace. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by analyzing the role of social recognition in the employee dismissal process in the context of viral cases in Indonesia, so that it can provide theoretical and practical contributions to organizational decision-making in the organizational dismissal process.

Based on these conditions, this study is important to understand how public reaction on social media develops and contributes to shaping social legitimacy towards employee firing decisions. By analyzing the digital public's reaction to the "Anita Tumbler" case, this study is expected to provide an understanding of the dynamics of MSDM decision making in the era of social media.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because it is to understand in depth the existing cases by finding the meaning, patterns, and reactions of the public on social media to a social event. Case studies are used to contextually and comprehensively examine the phenomenon (Tsang, 2013). Case "Anita Tumbler" which

represents the interaction between individual behavior, digital public reactions and management decisions within the organization.

Data Sources and Types

This study uses secondary data in the form of netizens' comments on social media uploads and online news platforms that discuss the "Anita Tumbler" case. The data was collected from social media platforms that contained publicly accessible public comment columns during the viral period of the case.

The research data used from the post :

1. <https://www.instagram.com/p/DRjdMc3ASYc/?utm>
2. <https://www.instagram.com/p/DRkFezwEsRR/?hl=en&utm>

(Data accessed 10 January, 2026)

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was carried out through digital documentation techniques, with the first step identifying uploads that triggered a significant public reaction related to the Anita Tumbler case. Further collecting netizens' comments relevant to the research topic within a certain time span from the first upload going viral, the final stage filters the comments to ensure relevance to the focus of the research, by excluding comments that are spammy, unrelated, or duplicative. The comment data is then converted into text format to be imported into the NVivo 12 software as the material analyzed. In addition to public comment, the study also refers to the company's official statement as contextual documentary material to describe the organization's response after the increased public reaction, this document is not encoded as primary data but is used to support the interpretation of the findings.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis with the help of Nvivo 12 software, through stages 1) Open coding, by performing initial coding of comment data to identify keywords, phrases and statements that reflect the public's reaction to the dismissal case, 2) axial coding, the initial codes were then grouped into broader categories, 3) selective coding, at this stage to integrate the main categories into the main theme, namely Public Reaction. 4) the final stage of visualization and interpretation of NVivo data to visualize the results of the analysis through hierarchy charts/treemaps and word clouds (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of the analysis of netizens' comment data using NVivo show that the public's reaction to the Anita Tumbler case forms a clear and structured thematic pattern. The reaction is organized into one main theme, namely Public Reaction, which consists of five dominant categories, namely: 1) Public Anger, 2) Coarse Insult, 3) Moral Assessment, 4) Mockery of Dismissal, and 5) Justification of Punishment. This structure represents how emotions, judgments, and public narratives evolve collectively in the digital space.

Figure 1. Visualization of the Main Theme of Public Reaction to the Anita Tumbler Case



Source : NVivo data processing 2026

1) Public Outrage and Gross Insults

Based on the visualization of the hierarchy chart, it shows that the categories of Public Anger and Coarse Insult appear as the most dominant reactions. Many netizens' comments expressed anger at the individual's behavior that was considered inappropriate, excessive, or reflected an unprofessional attitude. This anger is often accompanied by the use of emotional language and negative expressions. In addition to anger, Coarse Insult also occupies a large portion in the structure of public reaction. This category includes insults, swearing, and derogatory expressions directed directly at the individual involved in the case. These findings suggest that public reactions are not only evaluative, but also expressive and verbally aggressive.

2) Moral Judgment as a Form of Social Evaluation

The Moral Assessment category represents netizens' comments that contain normative assessments of individual actions. Netizens assessed the behavior displayed as inappropriate, excessive, or disproportionate to the problem that occurred. This moral judgment is not always accompanied by explicit anger, but appears in the form of an ethical evaluation of an individual's attitude, character, and suitability of behavior in the public sphere. The existence of this category shows that the public plays an active role as moral evaluators, which places certain standards on employee behavior, especially when the behavior becomes public consumption through social media.

3) Mockery of Dismissal

The results of the analysis also show that there is a category of Mockery of Dismissal, which is a public reaction that expresses ridicule or innuendo to the dismissal event itself. Comments in this category tend to use sarcastic tones or cynical humor, both towards the individual being fired and towards the consequences received. This mockery shows how dismissal is not only seen as a formal sanction, but also an object of symbolic consumption and public entertainment in the digital space.

4) Justification for Punishment

The Justification of Punishment category describes a public reaction that explicitly supports or justifies the decision to dismiss. Comments in this category indicate acceptance of the sanctions given, with the argument that the punishment is considered appropriate, reasonable, or appropriate as a consequence of the individual's behavior. These findings indicate a public

narrative that normalizes dismissal as a form of social responsibility.

The Company's Official Response to the "Anita Tumbler" Employee Dismissal Case

The results of the study also noted that there was an official response from the company after the public reaction to the "Anita Tumbler" case on social media. The response was conveyed through a written statement that was publicly published and addressed to the wider community as a form of clarification and explanation of the decision taken by the company. In its official statement, the company expressed concern over the termination of employment of the employee concerned, and appreciated the public attention and solidarity that developed on social media. The company emphasized that various information circulating, including the chronology of events, evidence of conversations, as well as input and proposed sanctions from the public, has been received and responded to seriously by management.

The statement also emphasized that actions taken by employees are considered not representative of the company's values and culture as a whole. Therefore, the company stated that it had conducted an internal investigation process by considering the applicable regulations and regulations before making a final decision. In the statement, it was confirmed that as of November 27, 2025, the employee in question will no longer work at the company. The company's statement is part of a series of events in this case, which shows the organization's response to the dynamics of public opinion that are developing in the social media space.

Figure 2. Official Response to Employee Dismissal in Anita Tumbler Case



Source : Trendingbuzz.id (Accessed 10 January 2026)

Language Patterns and Public Discourse Focus in the Anita Tumbler Case

The results of the word cloud analysis show the language patterns used by netizens in responding to the "Anita Tumbler" case. This visualization features the words that appear most often in public comments, representing the main focus and character that is developing on social media.

the legitimate interests of the organization. Without such a substantial impact, dismissal risks becoming a form of sanction that is disproportionate and exceeds the limits of the organization's managerial authority.

Based on the perspective of Legitimacy Theory, social legitimacy arises when organizational actions are perceived to be in line with applicable social values, norms, and expectations (Sánchez-del-Río-Vázquez et al., 2024; Meyer & Tse, 2025). The digital public reaction to this case represents the process of normative evaluation. The moral judgments that appear in netizens' comments show the standards of behavior that are considered appropriate for an employee in a digital public space (Chansukree et al., 2022). When an individual's behavior is judged to violate norms of civility, social empathy, or public ethics, the public tends to frame dismissal as a reasonable and socially acceptable consequence.

Legitimacy is not built through formal procedures or legal arguments alone, but rather through the emotional resonance that develops in the digital space and is widely accepted by online communities (Etter et al., 2018; Meyer & Tse, 2025; Warin et al., 2025). The intensity of public anger recorded in the data shows the existence of a social pressure mechanism that strengthens the legitimacy of organizational decisions. Anger not only serves as an expression of emotions, but also as a collective signal that certain actions are considered intolerable.

The findings of the study also show that the justification of punishment is one of the dominant themes in public reaction. The public not only criticized the employee's behavior, but explicitly supported the dismissal decision as a form of social justice and moral learning. This suggests that social legitimacy is formed when the public constructs dismissal as a corrective action that is in line with broader social interests, including the protection of an organization's reputation and the enforcement of norms. Furthermore, the ridicule and satire that appear in public comments reinforce the process of delegitimizing the position of employees, while also strengthening the legitimacy of the organization. The language of ridicule serves as a symbolic mechanism to demean individual actions and affirm the values embraced by the majority group. Thus, legitimacy is not only built through rational argumentation, but also through discursive practices that are symbolic and emotional.

Social legitimacy in the digital space is inherently fleeting, emotional, and heavily influenced by the dynamics of majority opinion. From an organizational justice perspective, internal evaluation is crucial to ensure a fair legal process, including clarification of events, opportunities for self-defense, and evidence-based assessment. Without this process, decisions solely based on public opinion risk violating the principle of procedural justice and creating the perception that the organization is subject to external pressure. In the long term, this can undermine employee trust in the company's internal systems and impact the psychological climate at work. From an organizational sustainability perspective, overly reactive responses to digital disruptions can create the perception that company policies are easily changed by the tide of opinion. Uncertainty within the organization has the potential to create a sense of insecurity among employees (Tadesse & Debela, 2024; Dong et al., 2024). A sustainable organization requires consistent policies, clear standards of conduct, and transparent and predictable enforcement mechanisms (Cabana & Kaptein, 2025).

Responsible human resource management emphasizes that dismissal is not simply a disciplinary action, but a strategic decision that impacts an individual's professional and social life. Considerations such as the severity of the error, intent, actual impact on the organization, and the possibility of alternative guidance or sanctions need to be thoroughly analyzed. A

balanced approach between reputation protection and employee rights reflects mature and ethical management practices.

Formal Corporate Response as Legitimacy Management Practice

The main mechanism in legitimacy management is discursive legitimation, which is manifested through the practice of justification and normalization (Vaara & Tienar, 2008). The company's official response shows the existence of a Rationale and normalization. From the perspective of stakeholder theory, the company's official response can be seen as a form of managing relationships with stakeholders (Suchman, 1995; Estaswara, 2020; Cho et al., 2025). Rationale It can be seen from the submission of the reasons for dismissal that are associated with violations of standards of conduct and its impact on the image of the organization. Meanwhile, normalization It can be seen from the use of formal and neutral language that places dismissal as a prevalent managerial action in management management in companies.

Dismissal due to personal uploads or opinions in the digital public space can destroy a person's career in a short period of time, without adequate space for clarification, reputational restoration, or contextual judgment. In many cases, spontaneous and personal expressions turn into permanent stigma due to the ever-circulating digital footprint. This shows that the social legitimacy formed through social media is not always in line with the principles of procedural justice and the protection of individual rights in employment relationships. However, these findings do not necessarily negate employees' responsibilities in using social media. Social media is a digital public space that has professional consequences, so employees are still required to be careful, reflective, and aware of the social implications of every expression conveyed. Personal expressions that conflict with dominant social values or potentially harm an organization's reputation can quickly trigger a public backlash that is beyond the control of individuals.

So that there is a need for a balance between the protection of freedom of expression, expressing opinions and professional obligations in maintaining communication ethics in digital public spaces. Human resources in the era of social media are not only required to be able to respond to public pressure, but also consider the proportionality of sanctions, the long-term impact on individuals, and justice mechanisms that protect both parties, namely the organization and the employees themselves.

Dismissal Decision Making in the Social Media Era: Organizational and Employee Perspectives

From an organizational perspective in the social media era, dismissal decisions are no longer solely within the organization's internal sphere. The pressures of fast-moving and massive digital public opinion influence decision-making. From the perspective of organizational legitimacy, as explained by Lim & Zhang, (2025) Meyer & Tse, (2025), explain that organizations tend to take actions perceived as aligned with dominant social values to maintain public support. When employee posts are perceived as contradictory to social norms or company values, dismissal is often positioned as a strategy to protect reputation and mitigate symbolic risk. However, overly reactive decision-making to the pressures of virality risks neglecting fair internal governance. Human resource management emphasizes that organizational responses to employee digital behavior should be based on clear policies, consistent enforcement of rules, and an evaluation of the actual impact on the organization, not simply the intensity of social media exposure (Zhu et al., 2025). Therefore, organizations need to balance external reputation management with internal

legitimacy to prevent decisions from fostering distrust among other employees.

From an employee perspective, social media has become a platform for personal expression that is increasingly difficult to separate from the professional sphere. According to Khazanchi & Saxena, (2025) Murto & Korpisaari, (2025), employees' rights to privacy and expression need to be carefully weighed in decision-making. Furthermore, according to Szegda & Tylec (2022) (2022), social media users have the right to exercise freedom of expression. Employees often experience uncertainty about the boundaries between freedom of expression and professional obligations, so personal posts can negatively impact their careers when linked to the organization's image. When there are no clear regulations or guidelines, dismissals based on social media content often create a conflict between an employee's right to freedom of expression and the organization's right to protect its reputation (social media rights vs. reputation). The permanent nature of digital footprints means that dismissals can have a long-lasting impact on an individual's reputation, even after the employment relationship ends. Many employees have difficulty finding new jobs after content that triggers their dismissal goes viral because professional perceptions on social media persist. This situation reinforces the importance of proportional sanctions, fair clarification mechanisms, and a restorative approach before repressive measures are taken in HR decisions. Balanced decisions require a comprehensive internal social media policy, transparent evaluation procedures, and clear communication with employees to ensure that personnel actions are not influenced solely by external pressures, but take into account the entire ethical, legal, and employment context.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the digital public reaction to the case of the dismissal of "Anita Tumbler" evolved from an individual opinion to a collective opinion that plays an important role in shaping the social legitimacy of management decisions. Such legitimacy is built through public outrage, moral judgment, justification of punishment, and ridicule that normalize dismissal as an act considered socially reasonable. These findings confirm that in the age of social media, the legitimacy of dismissal decisions is not only determined by formal procedures or internal policies of the organization, but also greatly influenced by public opinion and pressure in the digital space. A company's formal response serves as a legitimacy management practice by placing dismissal through normative reasons and formal language to maintain relationships with the public and stakeholders. However, dismissals triggered by spontaneous personal uploads have the potential to cause procedural injustice and long-term impacts for employees. Therefore, HR in the social media era needs to balance responding to public pressure with consideration of the proportionality of sanctions, behavioral context, and protection of employee rights, while encouraging prudence and professional responsibility in the use of social media. Further research could use a quantitative or mixed methods approach to empirically test the relationship between the intensity of digital public pressure, perceptions of procedural justice, and organizational sanction decisions. This would help identify whether public pressure is indeed a significant predictor of dismissal decisions.

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