

Adolescents in Virtual Forum: Playing, Socializing, or Engaging in Public Issues?

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18196/jkm.12300>

Article Info

Article history:
Received 13 Jul 2021
Revised 17 Sep 2021
Revised 5 Oct 2021
Accepted 14 Oct 2021

ABSTRACT

This research examines how adolescents perceive their memberships and involvement in virtual forums and whether the young generations see this involvement facilitate their engagement with public issues surrounding them. The increase of political discussions and political debates over the Internet and social media in Indonesia has become the trigger of this research to see whether adolescents as the group of new voters, even first-time voters, use virtual forums to be critically engaged in a discussion of public issues. Alternatively, this research would see whether their engagement in virtual communities is mainly related to entertainment, social connections, and other matters not directly related to politics and discussion of public issues. By interviewing a group of adolescents from at least eight provinces in Indonesia, this research examines the phenomenological experiences regarding their action, perception, and evaluation of their involvement through various virtual communities. This research highlights the importance of understanding adolescents' experiences in virtual communities to understand better their tendency and attitude in relating to issues in their online and offline environments.

Keywords: Adolescent; Entertainment; Public Issues; Socialization; Virtual Community.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menginvestigasi bagaimana remaja memahami keanggotaan dan keterlibatan mereka dalam forum virtual. Penelitian ini juga tertarik untuk menyelidiki apakah generasi muda melihat keterlibatan mereka dalam forum virtual sebagai suatu fasilitasi keterlibatan dalam diskusi isu sosial dan isu publik di sekitar mereka dengan kritis. Di tengah meningkatnya jumlah diskusi politik dan debat politik di Internet dan media sosial di Indonesia, yang kadang-kadang menyebabkan fragmentasi sikap dan gagasan seperti terlihat pada saat pemilihan umum daerah dan nasional, penelitian ini ingin mengetahui bagaimana remaja sebagai kelompok pemilih pemula, bahkan sebagai pemilih pertama, menggunakan saluran informasi ini untuk secara kritis untuk terlibat dalam masalah publik. Atau, apakah keterlibatan mereka dalam forum virtual sebagian besar terkait dengan hiburan, pembentukan hubungan sosial, dan hal-hal lain yang tidak terkait langsung dengan diskusi politik dan masalah publik. Dengan mewawancarai sekelompok remaja yang terdiri dari pelajar dan profesional muda dari setidaknya delapan provinsi di Indonesia, penelitian ini meneliti pengalaman fenomenologis mengenai tindakan, persepsi, dan evaluasi keterlibatan mereka melalui berbagai komunitas virtual. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya pemahaman tentang pengalaman remaja dalam keterlibatan dalam komunitas virtual, sehingga kita dapat lebih memahami kecenderungan dan sikap mereka terkait dengan isu-isu di lingkungan online dan offline mereka.

Kata Kunci: Remaja; Hiburan; Isu Publik; Sosialisasi; Komunitas Virtual.

INTRODUCTION

In our current fast-paced information flows, the use of communication technology, especially the Internet, cannot be separated from our daily communication. The importance of the Internet is true at every generational level. However, it is known that the younger generation's engagement with the Internet is relatively higher than the older generation since they have grown together with this technology and have used it in their daily socializations, education, and academic development (Smith et al. The great relevance of the Internet in people's lives can be seen from the continually increasing number of its users. Indonesia is one of the countries with the highest number of Internet users, with a population of more than 260 million people. Internet penetration in Indonesia has reached 50% of the population. A report mentions among these users that the Internet penetration to the group age of 10-14 years old (which mainly students) is reaching 100% (Siniwi & Herman, 2016). Internet users in Indonesia are generally active in social media (49% of the population), and a large number of them access the Internet via smartphones (60% of the population) (*Digital 2019*, 2019). Among the most accessed social media are Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Line, and these information platforms are among the top 5 most used social media in Indonesia. There are much research that revealed that these various social media are also used for political participation, particularly among the young generation (Saud & Margono, 2021; Aisya et al., 2019; Saud et al., 2020)

The support of social media for daily communication with their specific features is indisputable. Each social media has its distinctive affordances in providing advantages to the users. YouTube, for example, is becoming one of the primary alternatives for young people for obtaining a variety of information, ranging from entertainment to political and public issues commentaries. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook are often used to express opinions in the forms of postings, comments, and information sharing in diverse issues, from personal issues to socio-political issues surrounding the users. With Twitter increasing popularity among users, "hashtag trending" is often even referred to see which issues are gaining public attention at any given time. In addition, WhatsApp and Line are also gaining popularity as messaging applications, which are more commonly used as mobile applications (although they can also be used via a computer). Both media also have an essential role in disseminating socio-political and economic issues, aside from personal messengers. Unfortunately, the affordance of these messengers brings benefits to not only the users but also negative consequences. As a survey from Mastel in 2017 revealed, 62.80% of respondents admitted that WhatsApp is a channel that frequently delivers hoaxes or disinformation and misinformation to them (MASTEL, 2017). Respondents of this survey also reported that most of the false information they obtained was through WhatsApp messenger containing political news, especially about general elections and government performance.

LINE messenger application, on the other hand, is more popular among young users or what is often referred to as Generation Z. The ability of LINE messenger application is not only facilitating sending messages and conversations (chat) with fellow application users. This messenger application is also equipped with other critical supporting features, such as features in LINE Today and LINE Square. The feature of LINE Today contains news media aggregation on diverse issues, including economic, political, social, and cultural issues, to information about the world of entertainment. LINE Square facilitates conversation forums among users who have the same interest in various issues or themes. These forums then become virtual communities that can facilitate conversations and discussions among users dispersed in different geographical locations. In these LINE forums, group members can interact with one another without moderators, and they can organize themselves in various discussions. One of the downsides of the LINE forums is that a group member can expel another group member (or generally known as *kicking*) if there is dislike or disagreement about the position or opinion presented in the forum.

The abilities of the Internet and social media applications (such as those in the LINE messenger application) to facilitate the emergence of virtual communities that enable the creation of discussion forums has received the attention of many researchers, particularly in the context of participation in political discussions (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009; Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Vitak et al., 2011). These researchers see the potential of these forums to create a vehicle where people can exchange ideas, which then encourages the emergence of a culture of critical discussion about relevant issues in their lives. However, recent development shows that many virtual interactions fail to yield healthy conversations among its members. These discussions are often generating fragmentation of opinion

into extreme oppositions. These kinds of fragmented forums often result in divisions that lead to disagreements and tensions and do not produce enlightenment that leads to deliberations and consensus.

Considering this contradiction, this article investigates how Internet users utilize and participate in virtual forums. This article particularly focuses on the participation of the young generation or Generation Z (born from the mid to late 1990s) since they are often considered digital natives or the generation born and raised in the Internet era. As previously mentioned, LINE messenger application is more popular among this age group. Therefore, the investigation will focus on the participation in virtual forums supported by this messenger application. This article is interested to investigate questions, such as; (1) does the membership in virtual forums is driven by the awareness to conduct rational and critical discussions to achieve deliberation?; (2) or, are they entering virtual groups for other purposes, such as entertainment, socialization, and other matters not directly related to discussion of politics and public issues?; (3) what are some activities they do and what benefit they acquire in virtual forums? All these questions will be explored in detail in the later sections of the article.

Mass media have been recognized to have an essential role in adolescents' development. Studies have shown that media contribute at least five important aspects of adolescents' life, which include: entertainment, identity formation, obtaining high sensation, helping in coping challenges, and youth culture identification (Arnett, 1995). As Arnett argues further, media is also deemed instrumental in adolescents' socialization, a process in which adolescents acquire – or resist to acquire – certain behaviors, beliefs, norms, values, and cultures of the social world where they live (Arnett, 1995). Of course, mass media is not the only agent for socialization, and there are also family, school, community, social system, and legal systems. However, somewhat different from other socialization agents that encourage adolescents to embrace and follow certain behaviors, beliefs, norms, and values to preserve social order, media provide various contents and diverse choices of values and beliefs for adolescents to choose for themselves (Arnett, 1995). Given the media industry's market-driven nature, media will attempt to provide what they believe adolescents want. In this sense, adolescents have more control over the socialization process through media than over other socialization agents, where they have the choices to adapt the content that they consider suits them (Arnett, 1995). As one of the advancements and new developments in media technology, the Internet also plays the identical essential role as its predecessor. Adolescents nowadays access their information and entertainment and use the Internet as part of their coping mechanism and socialization in their social world.

The affordances and the capabilities of the Internet provide even more possibilities to assist adolescents' socialization process, other than as a channel where they obtain their helpful information. Many different applications on the Internet have been argued to support users in their young age, including the virtual reality that is understood as a simulated reality where the user is perceived as real (Cruz-Neira et al., 2018). Virtual Reality (VR) in the form of games afforded by the Internet has been argued to provide “education and training for an engaging adventure, providing learning skills to improve users' expertise” (Cruz-Neira et al., 2018). Often the purpose of gaming is no longer only limited to just for entertainment but also to learn or train specific skills through game, which is widely known as edutainment. In the context of children development, immersive virtual reality has been argued to be able to “stimulate cognitive immersion, a process in which the mind and body become integrated with a virtual experience, given the technological affordances of the system” (Bailey & Bailenson, 2017). Hence, the Internet also plays a role in young generation's education.

Other than supporting adolescent learning processes, researchers have also argued that the Internet offers a certain type of private space for young people (Downs, 2011). The Internet became a private space for adolescents because it is a space where they can separate themselves from adults and from demand to adhere to the rules of the adults and immerse in leisure activities. They can participate in numerous activities they enjoy, such as playing games, chatting with friends, listening to music, experimenting on new identities, watching and following their peers' activities, connecting with others with similar interests, and many other enjoyable activities. Some young people can also use the Internet as a private space for coping mechanisms to resolve issues and pressures from their peers, adults, and the outside world (Downs, 2011). However, it cannot be denied that this space also poses risks to young people. Their involvements also cause vulnerability to be exposed to harmful content, bullying, sexual predators, and other risks in virtual space.

Another crucial role of the Internet for a young generation that has been argued in many research is that the Internet can support and facilitate political discussions, political participation, and civic

engagements (Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2009; Macafee & De Simone, 2012; Moy et al., 2005). The traditional sources of information are indeed still having significant contributions in informing political issues. However, newer information channels such as social media, weblogs, and microblogging can afford more interactive communication that helps the young generation be more vocal and more expressive to convey their political point of view. The conversation among peers and community members also helps drive active political participation and engagements, as existing literature has argued that exposure to people with identical political perspectives contributes positively to political participation (Dilliplane, 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2017). The conversation among peers, including the ones through social media, plays a part in supplementing and enhancing one's knowledge about politics and other civic issues. Quality discussions through various online forums would have positive contributions to form good knowledge and a better understanding of political and civic issues relevant to one's life.

Nevertheless, questions have been raised regarding the direct relation between political engagement online through the internet with actual political engagement offline. Does online political participation always translate to offline political participation? Or do the Internet users extend their involvement from the virtual to real-world activeness to generate impact in the political process? Boulianne and Theocharis offer a notion that connects these two kinds of activism in the online and offline realm. They propose two concepts that they named gateway and spillover (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018). On one hand, the Internet can function as a *gateway*, meaning that online political engagement would lead to offline participation. Political engagement in the online realm would lead to higher possibilities for one to be exposed to political information that would enhance political knowledge. It would also increase the possibility of connecting and building social networks that potentially lead to offline political activism (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018). On the other hand, the Internet can also be used by the people that have been previously involved in offline political participation to search for more information and opportunities to do more political involvement. In this case, then the Internet is seen as only generating *spillover* effects. From both gateway and spillover concepts, we see the translation of online and offline political activism is not depended solely on Internet facilitation, but it is also determined by the political predisposition of the people who are involved in political issues in the first place, whether he/she is motivated to engage in political issues. Someone with propensity and interest with political issues would most likely find the Internet to be able to support his/her interest, either in broadening his/her knowledge and network to know more about political issues, or in finding certain political movements or activism to further his/her political participation in the offline realm.

Although the Internet does not encourage political participation in itself, the ability of this medium to connect people with the same interest is one of its strong capabilities to support participation and build community, which can lead to offline movement. If we look back at the notion of virtual community from Rheingold as a space to bring people together to benefit each other (Rheingold, 1993), people in virtual communities communicate without caring what people look like or where they come from, but only care about what people think and what they communicate. In addition, Rheingold also argues that virtual communities are characterized by social contacts that bind their members, albeit with flexible ties (or loose social contracts). This social contract is in the form of consensus that if someone gives or contributes something to the community, he also can receive something (Rheingold, 1993). Hence, in a virtual community, it is possible that assistance received by someone can be gained from the energy expended from others, which Rheingold describes as a good combination between altruism and the fulfillment of personal interests (Rheingold, 1993).

From the description above, it is clear that there is optimism or a positive outlook in Rheingold's depiction of the concept of virtual communities in the early emergence of this phenomenon when the early widespread use of the Internet. A similarly optimistic view also arises, which argues that the virtual community supported by Internet technology can become a new public sphere as a picture of the ideal public space described by Habermas (1992). Ideal public space in Habermas's thinking has several normative rules, such as (1) providing orientation and guidance on the political world that places citizens in positions to be able to participate politically; (2) bringing up transparency by highlighting public issues or political problems that can be solved collectively that make the social environment a realm that can be observed and monitored by all citizens; (3) provide a means for the creation of deliberation that will be able to bring up validity based on consensus-based on rational thought and exchange of arguments (Göttlich & Herbers, 2014). Initially, in Habermas's argument, this ideal public space can be found in the meeting rooms of the bourgeoisie. This bourgeois group

generally consists of educated people. They can discuss rationally and discuss public issues and political issues critically that allow for deliberation that results in consensus.

The presence of the Internet and numerous virtual forums supported by this technology, at least in the early days of its emergence, brought new hope and optimism that this new media could revive the existence of an ideal public space for the community. The normative principles contained in the concept of public space conveyed by Habermas, namely *orientation*, *transparency*, and *validity*, were seen to be realized in discussion forums supported by the Internet. The large amount of information exchanged by a large number of Internet users involved in discussion forums was seen to provide orientation and guidance on public issues and knowledge of the political world, which is closely linked to people's lives. In addition, forums supported by the Internet were also seen enabling a deliberative process in which arguments and counter-arguments can be brought together and discussed, providing a way to create consensus-based on active political communication. These forums were seen to be accessible to various groups of people without regard to social, political, cultural, and economic backgrounds, or racial, gender, religious, and group backgrounds, so that no one will be excluded or marginalized in these discussion forums. These aspects were considered the main key of a democratic deliberation process. These normative principles were also seen as making discussion forums supported by the Internet as an ideal public space in society.

However, an optimistic view of the presence of the Internet in reviving the new ideal public space was immediately criticized by pointing out some weaknesses of these virtual forums in creating orientation, transparency, and validation. Some arguments that stated virtual forums supported by Internet were not ideal public spaces are based on the fact that the Internet is not an open channel of communication for all people without any exclusions and barriers to entry and participation in it (Schlozman et al., 2010; Büchi & Vogler, 2017; Willis & Tranter, 2006). The fact that Internet access is not equal for all people, and the disparity in access caused by infrastructure gaps between one region and another, or often known as the digital divide (Sokowati, 2019), had been considered sufficient to negate virtual forums as ideal public spaces. This disparity occurs at the regional level between urban and rural areas, the national level between regions in proximity to the economic and administrative center, the border and periphery areas, and the international level between developed and developing countries, north and south. This difference in access becomes an important issue that creates different opportunities for discussion and involvement in deliberations to reach consensus.

In addition to arguments regarding disparity in access, discussions in virtual forums were also considered not ideal public spaces. In many cases, the discussion does not lead to consensus but to fragmentation and the emergence of like-minded groups and has a similar political outlook. Hence, instead of bringing together arguments and counter-arguments to generate deliberations based on rational arguments and discussions, virtual forums on the Internet became a place to attack and throw slurs the ones' discussion counterparts. The more recent occurrences on virtual discussion forums are the tendencies for users to selectively choose specific forums and limit the exchanges of information to those that only reinforce and perpetuate political views and ideological beliefs a person already has. People no longer consume information and hold discussions to see and listen to views that differ from their views. On the contrary, they only open themselves and pay attention to the news and discussion in accordance to their liking and those that correspond to their preferences. These circumstances drive the emergence of echo chambers in virtual discussion rooms on the Internet. This phenomenon further reinforces the reasoning that virtual forums on the Internet are not ideal public spaces.

The various research that show the abilities and the shortcomings of the Internet in supporting young generations or adolescents' socialization, development, learning, entertainment, and political participation draw this research to investigate this issue further in the context of adolescent life in Indonesia. Through the investigation of social media use of the young generation in Indonesia, this research will enrich the knowledge and the conversation regarding the role of technology in adolescent development. As one country with an emerging democracy and economy, there is an increasing interest to gain a better understanding of how young generations' digital behavior. Whether their involvement in virtual communities largely to play and entertain, socialize, or involved in discussions related to political and civic issues will be examined in the following section in this article.

METHODS

To answer the questions regarding the involvement, the purpose, and the activities of adolescents in virtual forum, this research conducted interviews with fifteen informants, who were members and active participants of one or more virtual communities. The fifteen informants interviewed were between the ages of 15-20 years, and they resided in several major cities in Indonesia, such as Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Medan, Denpasar, and Lombok. Judging from the age range of these informants, some of them were categorized as early voters in the democratic political system in Indonesia, and some of them still did not have the right to vote. All informants were contacted based on their membership and participation in a public group in LINE Messenger. Through their LINE account, they were contacted and asked if they were willing to participate in the research interview. All personal identification of the informants are confidential, and there is no information in the research publication that can be identified specifically to a particular informant. All interviews were conducted and analyzed in Indonesian and then translated to English to explain the findings.

Through interviews, it was found that these informants were involved in several virtual forums in the LINE application, such as Political Jokes, Brain Laundry, Line Police Department, Line Police Indonesia, Agnostic Indonesia, Feminist, Hardcore Gamer Group, and Red Army, with varied length of membership. These variations of virtual forums (which are not limited to political-themed forums) are expected to provide a picture of the diversity of involvement and the variety of motivations for engaging and participating in virtual forums. Data analysis was conducted by exploring each participant's interview result thematically to see the involvement, participation, and use of virtual discussion forums. Ultimately, the findings and arguments in this research are based on the phenomenological experiences of all informants involved in this research. Further discussion of the results of the interview will be presented in the following discussion section.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As previously stated, the informants in this research can be categorized as an adolescent or young adults. This age is known as a digital native or generation that has been familiar with the Internet and other digital technologies. This age group is well-versed and capable of using a variety of Internet applications, both through computer and smartphone or other mobile technologies. It is also not too difficult for them to learn various mobile applications and to master and use them fluently. This native digital generation is also characterized by their entanglement with technology in their day-to-day socialization. Digital technology is an inherent and an inseparable part of the way they are connected to their social world, in terms of friendship, academic responsibility, and knowledge of the world at large. In this case, the role of virtual forums becomes an essential means for them to look for information related to the things that interest them and to connect with people they consider important enough for them to approach.

This is clearly revealed in the informants' answers when they were asked about the first time they join a virtual forum, in this case a virtual forum through the LINE. Most of them admitted they first got involved in a virtual forum because of their interest in a particular hobby, and they wanted to explore the topic through a virtual forum. For example, an informant was interested in particular photographs he saw on Instagram, and it made him want to find out more information about this hobby. This interest then made him join the virtual forum "*Instanusantara*", which is the photography community at LINE. Likewise, informants interested in finding out more about a particular sport (skateboarding) and online games were also looking for more information or looking for people with the same interests through virtual forums to discuss these matters further. However, besides wanting to know more and meet people with similar interests, some informants joined virtual forums because they wanted to expand social connections in the physical world (offline) to the virtual world (online). This happens when classmates or other friends want to extend their connection and their communication to a virtual forum. Many informants mentioned that this kind of communication expansion was their first experience joining a virtual forum. However, not only limited to classmates and immediate peers, some informants mentioned the involvement in the virtual community was driven by the aspiration to connect in community based on the locality of geographical areas, such as gamers throughout Jabodetabek, youth social community in Bekasi, etc. Virtual communities are then considered to make connecting members that were dispersed in a relatively vast area, which could not be reached otherwise. It is clear that these informants joined the virtual forum for the first time in

various ways, ranging from seeking information about interests, extending the actual world related to the virtual world, and as a means of socialization in a particular geographical locality.

The interviews also showed that not all informants join virtual forums based on self-motivation, or driven by their own desire to interact and participate in the forum. Initiation to join in a virtual forum could also come from the invitation from others. In many cases, this kind of initiation results in a relatively passive role in the early days of joining the forum. This can be seen from the interviews of several informants who stated that at first, they were not too enthusiastic and were not actively looking for a virtual forum to be involved in. They just followed other people's invitation without thinking too much about it. However, these informants saw a quite interesting interaction and saw information worthy of being followed through. This encounter made them feel at home and remained in a virtual forum, which sometimes took several years. Once they were comfortable in a forum, they felt a connection with other members in the forum. One informant stated that the comfort found in virtual forums could be equated to interacting and communicating with family members. They feel free to express their views and opinions related to the themes that are discussed in the forum. In addition to comfort in communicating, another reason for a member to stay in the forum, stated by one of the informants, was whether or not forum members are responsive and enthusiastically reply to your question or topic you raised in the forum. This factor is more or less a determinant factor in staying in a forum because this was considered an indication of acceptance felt by members and an indication that the interaction is going well and would most likely be beneficial to a particular member.

Reasons to Stay in Virtual Forum

Data from the interview revealed several different reasons why informants stay in a virtual forum after the initial joining to a forum, whether they were joining because of self-motivation or because of the invitation of others. These reasons can be categorized into four groups: the most uncommitted to the most committed one. The first category is the lack of activities. A number of informants admitted that they stayed in a forum because it provided a venue where they could involve themselves in something when they did not have anything important to do. When these informants have a break time or have low time without any significant activities to pursue, virtual forums can be an alternative place to find some interesting conversations or interactions to fill the time. One of the informants called this kind of low time "gabut", when he said, "*I have no special reason to stay [in the virtual forum], I just stay...I am basically rarely 'ON' in the forum. And when I am ON, it is just because I do not have anything important to do, and because I was bored and gabut. So why I seem to participate often in forums lately is just because I am in a low time, but next week I probably will be disappearing from the forum*". This answer indicates that virtual forums can function as a space to fill the void of activities and interactions. A virtual forum is considered a social connection that will always be there even when one disconnects for the time being and is available to be activated whenever he/she reactivates the connection. Hence, virtual forums become an alternative space to revive social interaction whenever a member needs it.

The second category of answers regarding staying in virtual forums is to expand and strengthen social networks. Several informants mentioned they stay in the virtual forum because they want to establish new connections with more people (including the members in the forum they are in), to meet and to know more people because of limited number of friends offline, to meet more like-minded people or people with same interests, and to be closer to other members in the forum and to have chance to meet with them. Staying in a virtual forum also allows interaction with members of various backgrounds, age groups, educations, and walks of life. As an informant said, "*...[stay in forum] could add information for myself, if there are a lot of people in the group who have different educational backgrounds, different knowledge ... well that's the reason I stay in the group so that I can enrich to my insights...*" It can be seen that several informants valued the connection in the virtual forum as an extension of their social world. If they feel that they do not have many friends in their immediate physical environment, virtual world can be a place to forge new relations. Once they form new connections through the virtual world, they want to extend it to the physical world through meet-ups or by having community gatherings. Therefore, the relationship in virtual and physical worlds is not a relation in two separate worlds, but they are connected and complementary to one another.

The third category of reason to stay in a virtual forum is the availability of quality discussion. A number of informants stated they chose to stay in the forum because they could be involved in a

critical discussion that made them think about various issues, including law, social, and political issues. These informants often find serious discussions in the forum they joined, and these discussions help them to think about those issues themselves, which they would not do otherwise. As one informant explained, “...*why [I] stay because many members in the forum are critical, and there are many [who have] different mindsets from me ... so that is a good topic for study material [for me].*” This shows that many informants found that virtual forums provide them orientation to think about and understand their surroundings. To some adolescents, a virtual forum can be a space to learn issues relevant to social life and to learn points of view that are different from theirs. For one informant who is a law student, staying and interacting in a virtual forum provides an opportunity to learn from the more knowledgeable members regarding the aspects of the national law, which he found a way to learn in amore interactive way complement his academic studies on campus. Thus, we can see from several adolescent informants that virtual forums function as a space for socialization and as a space for learning and gaining knowledge.

The fourth and the last category of answers of reasons to stay in the virtual forum is the comfort and closeness to the members in the forum. Several informants admitted they could form relations to the level of closeness as a family when they could throw jokes, complaints, problems, and even pour their heart (often known as *curhat*) in the forum. As one of the informants explained, “*I feel like I have a family, those who understand me the most ... when I fall they are there, when I am tall they are there ... so I feel like I have a family*”. Although this informant added that not all members in the forum are the same, at least a number of friends in the virtual could be counted when needed. Another informant said, “...*the feeling that I get the most in a virtual forum is the cohesiveness among member....when I need a favor, they do not hesitate to offer one....*” It is clear from this explanation that for some informants, a virtual forum is not only about making friends and expanding networks, but it is also a safe and comfortable space to have. It also indicates that connection to the people in a virtual forum could be a coping mechanism when an informant encounters difficulties and problems in their life.

Activities Pursued in Virtual Forum

As one of the popular messenger applications among adolescents, LINE is most commonly used for communicating and coordinating among peers. This activity is also one of the prime activities in the virtual forum provided by this application, as revealed in the interview. However, aside from communicating and chatting, there are also other distinct activities conducted by adolescents in the virtual forum. Based on the result of the interview, this research categorizes activities in virtual forums into three categorizations, (1) sharing and exchanging information, (2) throwing cordial mockery, and (3) engaging in informed discussion.

Most of the informants admitted that chatting and talking to other members is the most frequent activity in the virtual forum. Sometimes no particular topic was discussed on the forum; people just talk about something that interests them or just throw a joke at each other. Sometimes it is just the daily life of the members, and other times it can be a life experience of people who want to share it with others. Virtual forums have become one of the places to go to connect with others just for socializing with others. As one of the informants mentioned, “*what I do in that group is just normal communication ... chatting ... joking ... posting or reposting what I think are interesting and [that I think] relevant in the group..*” We can see here that although the interactions in virtual forums can be considered casual conversation, or idle talk, which many people perhaps think to be trivial, this continuous communication will generate bonding among members, despite the absence of physical aspect of communication. These casual conversations in virtual forums were expanded to other forms of interaction aside from text-based conversations. One informant stated that she also talked to other members a number of times through non-paid group calls or video group calls. Although she only could do this activity to two or three people in the forum, she still felt that she connected to the virtual forum through this communication.

The second category of informants' answers regarding activities in virtual forums, which this research found quite interesting, is engaging in cordial mockery. In the interview, several informants mentioned that other than chatting, they also frequently ‘make scenes’ in the forum to invite other members to join the interaction. Stirring the conversation could be done in many different forms. Sometimes they are just jokingly bullying other members. Other times they are spamming the forum with funny pictures, quirky news, or interesting videos. One informant said he even goes as far as

making a meme of members and posting it to the forum just to solicit comments from other members. Although this activity sounds negative, and the informants use negative expressions to describe it, such as creating uproar or stirring commotion (*buat rush*, in Indonesian), they stated no harm and foul intention behind these actions. They just see this as an effective way to entice people to engage in conversation in the forum, mainly when they see there are not many activities. One of the informants said, “...yeah sometimes I like to start trouble ... to make some noises. Sometimes the group feels so quiet ... so that's why I started rioting too ... I also then post and share something in the timeline; perhaps some people like it and start commenting on it... “. From here, we see several informants feel the need and care enough to make sure the forum continues to operate as space for conversation. An idle forum needs to be avoided and remedied by luring people to talk, although through a somewhat negative approach. This also indicates the members' inclination to preserve and maintain the bonding that has been formed in the forum.

The third category of answers regarding activity in the forum is engaging in informed discussion. A group of informants admitted that their involvement in the virtual forum mostly revolved around conversing, commenting on the conversation, and sometimes debating specific issues with other members. Part of the reason for this activity is the nature of the forum they were involved in, which was a kind of specific forum that talked about serious topics. This is typical for the informants who reported that they joined a virtual forum to learn something, to gain knowledge regarding particular issues. However, not all informants have typical participation in the forum. One informant said that he participates in discussions, posting comments, and offering his opinion if he has one, while one informant said that he prefers to follow a discussion and just for time to time offer his comment in the discussion. The latter informant is more cautious in offering his thoughts and avoids debating without a clear argument. If he sees that discussion gravitating toward people just conversing for the sake of debating each other, he will withdraw from the forum discussion.

Benefit Perceived in Joining Virtual Forum

The benefits perceived by the informants from the virtual forum are tied to the activities they conducted in the forum. For those who use virtual forums to communicate, chat, expand, and strengthen their social ties, the primary benefits they perceive are mostly related to forging connections for socialization. Adding new friends, sharing and exchanging information, finding peers for playing, joking, and spending time together are among the benefits that were reported in the interview. The information exchange is not only limited to entertainment and leisure but can also be a professional opportunity, such as information about job and occupation. Some also reported some psychological benefits obtained from joining the virtual forum. Interactions in the forum are seen as a way to release tension, stress and even as a way out from sadness they face in their immediate physical environment. This research resounded the argument from Downs (2011), where the space on the Internet could generate private space for adolescents to separate themselves from the pressure in their surroundings, including the pressures from peers and adults.

Other informants mentioned that the benefit they acquired from the virtual forum they joined is the space to express themselves to other people. Some informants see virtual forums as a place where they can be who they are, and they do not have to be ashamed of their opinion. Some informants that perceived support from other members in the forum would most likely feel this way. On the opposite side, some informants are more cautious in expressing opinions in virtual forums because they avoid confrontational discussions or conversations in the forum. Withdrawal from the discussion could also happen when informants perceived the discussion gravitating to discussions conducted to make arguments without clear points to exchange.

The benefit of learning and gaining new knowledge is one of the benefits that surfaced from the interview. Informants see membership and participation in virtual forums as something that positively contributes to their knowledge-acquiring, whether it is knowledge about their hobbies and interest, knowledge about other members, knowledge about social issues of their surroundings, and knowledge about other members perspectives that are different from them. A number of informants admit that from virtual forums, they could obtain information about current social issues, civic issues, political issues, and how to govern society. Following discussions in a virtual forum helps them gain a picture of their social world and makes them think of those issues more critically than when they were not joining the forum.

The data from the interview shows that, in line with Arnett's (1995) argument regarding the role of mass media in adolescent life, the Internet also functions in a number of important aspects of adolescent life. Informants experiences show the interaction through virtual forum can be the source of the entertainment, the facility to socialize with their peers, the space for them to be themselves and to cope to the stressful situation and pressure from their surroundings, as well as a space for orientation in understanding many different issues in their social world, including social and political issues, and space for them to acquire different perspectives other than their own. With all these experiences gained in virtual forums, it can be argued that virtual forums on the Internet have assumed the role of mass media in adolescent life.

As seen in the interview, virtual forums on the Internet are not naturally and solely seen as a space to engage in discussion related to social politics and civic issues. Virtual forums can be many things to adolescents, and they use the forum for various purposes. Adolescents have the opportunity to orient themselves in many issues that matter to their public life and relevant issues in their political and social context if they choose to do so. Virtual forums exist to function in this regard, and they can access those forums if they engage themselves to participate in those forums.

Despite the pessimism that the Internet with its diverse applications that support virtual forums cannot present as an ideal public space, information and communication technology is still considered to have the ability to contribute to democratic political processes. The case put forward by Fung et al. (2013) argues for six models of information and communication technology support in a democratic political process. The argument about these six models begins with the assumption of a democratic political model, which they call the "conveyor belt" model. This model starts at one end of the conveyor belt consisting of citizens interested in and care about politics, politicians, and public policy. These concerned citizens then formed interest groups and social movement organizations to fight for their aspirations, interests, and policies that were important to them. At the same time, they also invite, accept members, and mobilize citizens to advocate more strongly and voice their views in public spaces for others to listen to. At the other end of the conveyor belt is the government which acts in two important respects; issuing regulations and policies, and acting directly in running the government. Citizens and their interest groups have the capacity and power to determine who the people who sit in the government are through the mechanism of elections, lobbying, and political pressure through communication. Simply put, this is the process that takes place in democratic politics. Of course, the process in real conditions is far more complex, but this process is happening in principle.

CONCLUSION

This research attempted to investigate how adolescents use their involvement in virtual forums afforded by the Internet. It is motivated by the recent development in Indonesia, where there is a trend of using forums on the Internet for boisterous political discussions in the context of political elections at the national and regional levels in the country. This situation brought up the question of whether adolescents naturally saw their involvement in virtual forums to engage in social and political issues in their surroundings. Hence, this research came up with the first question: Is membership in virtual forums driven by the awareness to conduct rational and critical discussions to achieve deliberation? The interview showed there are numerous motivations of adolescents to join virtual forums, and not all of them started with awareness to conduct rational and critical discussion. However, to some of them, this can be the case. Some adolescents in the interview mentioned they join virtual forums because they do not have any better things to do or because they lack activities. For this group of adolescents, virtual forum provides other space for activities that they cannot find in their immediate surroundings. In a sense, this is not a motivation to engage in serious and critical discussion. However, a group of adolescents sees participation in virtual forums as a way to engage in quality discussion. They can learn other perspectives and positions that are different from theirs. In this sense, this group of adolescents saw their membership in the virtual forum as an opportunity to conduct rational and critical discussions to achieve deliberation.

To the second question, whether adolescents enter the virtual group for purposes not directly related to the discussion of politics and public issues, this research found that this is the case. The interview showed adolescents were involved in many different activities in virtual forums, ranging from entertaining, socializing, coping mechanisms, building networks of friendship, and developing

their hobbies and interests. Nevertheless, this research also found there is also a group of adolescents who motivated to orient themselves in social and public issues are also found in this research. These adolescents purposely joined the forum to fulfill their curiosity and actively offered their thought in the discussion. However, this research showed adolescents felt some wariness if the discussion in the forum would wind up in negativity. There is an indication that adolescents were reluctant to be actively involved in the conversation when they saw unhealthy exchange among members in the forum. These adolescents saw the need to tread carefully in their involvement in the forum.

Regarding the third question about the benefit that adolescents acquire in virtual forums, this research found that virtual forums give some benefits. They include forging connections for socialization, providing space to express themselves to other people, and contributing to knowledge-acquiring of various fields, including knowledge about hobbies and interest, other members, social issues, and different perspectives from others. Hence, virtual forums can be functioned to learn, gain knowledge, and orient themselves to understand more about civic engagements if they choose to do so.

This research, therefore, argues that virtual forums could be spaces that have various meanings to adolescents. Engaging in rational and critical debate and gaining knowledge in social issues are not the only motivations of adolescents to be a member of a virtual forum. In addition, the more playful purposes, such as to connect to other people and to avoid idleness, are also part of the motivation to join the virtual forum. The finding in this research is generally in line with the arguments proposed by previous research that see positive sides of the Internet for adolescents for providing space for socialization and forging connection, and providing space for conversation and knowledge-acquiring.

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