

**SOCIAL INTERACTION AND INTERNET-BASED
COMMUNICATION**

(Symbolic Interactionism Approach on Internet Use in Indonesia)

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ABSTRACT

SOCIAL INTERACTION AND INTERNET-BASED COMMUNICATION (Symbolic Interactionism Approach on Internet Use in Indonesia)

The use of internet as a part of Indonesian's daily life has been tremendous. Businessmen, professionals, housewives, teens and even small kids use internet as a media of communication and a part of modern lifestyle through cell phones and personal computers. Other persons in different place now can be reached in no time and internet also opens new opportunities. However, family member now realize that new technology does not always bring happiness. More and more family connection and social relationship has loosened and more kids become internet-addicted. Children skip school, neglect their daily duties, have less contact with other family members and enter a new world under their own control.

How does the new technology shape a new social change in Indonesia? How do people create interaction and interpret meanings through the internet? Will it lead to joint action?

New technology has advantages and disadvantages. As long as the benefit is beyond the expense, there is no reason to be resistant to new change in life. With internet, people can expand their horizon and create meaningful actions. Despite its disadvantages, internet has formed a new kind of society that is different with the conventional society based on geographical boundaries.

Symbolic interactionism theory from GH Mead is used to analyze this phenomenon. Since this theory was developed before the emergence of internet, it is necessary to modify and exercise different method. According to Mead and written by Blumer (1969:2), there are three premises in the theory: first premise is that human being act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. The second premise is that the meanings of such thing is derived from or arise out of the social interaction that one has followed. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by person in dealing with the things.

Preliminary analysis on this research shows that internet has enhanced the social interaction and joint action among its users. At the same time, some others still argue that the internet has widened the gap among family members.

Keywords: *symbolic interactionism, meaning, social interaction, joint action*

INTRODUCTION

SOCIAL INTERACTION AND INTERNET-BASED COMMUNICATION

(Symbolic Interaction Approach on Internet Use in Indonesia)

The use of internet has become inseparable part of Indonesian's life. Million of Indonesians use this technology through personal computer (PC) or by cellular phone (mobile phone). Besides web browsing, making emails and chatting, more and more people now use Blackberry technology as a continuous chatting and web connection. Not surprisingly, the internet user in Indonesia has grown enormously to 25 million in 2009 (APJII, 2010).

Ironically, some people say that this technology also has disadvantages indicated from less connection among family members. Parents now complain about the kids' addictions of the internet i.e.: they forget school, home works, studying at home and less interaction with people around them like neighbors, even their parents in the same house. Kids prefer having connections with friends in faraway places and even some homes in Jakarta use mobile connections just to ask to have dinner together although they are in the same house. Despite those negative impacts, many positive impacts also come with the internet communication such as reunion of old friends and relatives which was also accelerated by the popularity of Facebook, a social network site. Not to mention some online communities who gather both virtually and face-to-face that lead to exchange of knowledge, latest information and news and sometimes solve society problems.

In the science perspective, it is undeniable that technology advancement influences social change or commonly called as technological determinism (Straubhaar and LaRose, 2008:151), that include person to person communication pattern. In relation to internet, there are two paradoxes i.e.: greater use of the Internet was associated with declines in participants' communication with family members in the household, declines in the size of their social circle, and increases in their depression and loneliness (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukhopadhyay, and Scherlis in *American Psychologist*, 1998) versus time spent with co-workers and with friends tends to be higher for internet users (Robinson, Kestnbaum, Neustadl and Alvares in their writings of "IT & Social Displacement" in *IT & Society*, 1(1), 2002. This study was then developed for another 3 years using longitudinal method and the result showed that internet users had an increase of social connectedness.

In Indonesia, these are some researches related to the impact of the internet use on social interaction on postgraduate level in communication field :

- a. Research on Interpersonal Relationship through Internet by using Attraction Theory and Social Penetration Theory, Stelly Maria, 2003 FISIP UI.
- b. Research on Communication Pattern : Factors that Influence Internet use by using Media Uses and Gratification Theory, Hardjito, 2001, FISIP UI.
- c. Research on Interpersonal Relationship through IRC (Internet Relay Chatting) by using Dyadic Communication, Adenita Yusminovita, FISIP UI , 2001.

DISCUSSION

Related to internet communication, it is necessary to examine what has been done in the study of internet disadvantages (pessimistic perspectives) and advantages (optimistic perspectives).

Pessimistic Perspective

This perspective believes that CMC (Computer-mediated-Communication) technology is too inherently antithetical to the nature human life and too limited technologically for meaningful relationship to form (Stoll, 1995 in Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002:10). In addition, Beniger (1998) also argued that cyberspace can not be a source of meaningful friendship. More arguments in the book of Handbook of Media (Lievrouw et al, 2002) also supported this statement such as: online relationship may involve lower interdependence, commitment and permanence (Parks & Roberts, 1998; Rice : 1987a), the more time we spend online, the less time we will have to interact directly with our family, neighbor and other community members (Shapiro and Leone, 1999), we may develop relationship online may let our relationship with those around us suffer (Schroeder and Ledger 1998; Shapiro and Leone, 1999), one's freedom of expression on the internet is another's predation and indecency, especially when the users are children (Schroeder and Ledger, 1998). Tapscott (1997) also identifies some possible disadvantages on the increased individuality and interactivity provided to young users by the internet, such as disconnected from formal institutions, misleading and dangerous representation of information and identities, flaming, overload, lack of evaluation by informed gatekeepers and emphasis on short term.

Optimistic Perspectives

On the other hand, optimistic perspective increasingly sees the internet as a medium for social interaction (Lievrouw et al) and their book also contains some more optimistic perspectives such as: ethnographic study by Hamman (1999) concluded that internet communication complements real world relations, and Wellman and Gulia's (1999a) review of research on internet communities argued that offline relationships maybe strengthened as well as weakened. Surveys by Parks and colleagues found evidence of intimate and well-developed online relationship , often leading to real-world interactions, even though the frequency and duration of online relationships tend to be shorter (Parks and Roberts, 1998). A Pew Research Center (2000) poll reported that internet users indicated that e-mail had improved their social and kinship connection, and more so for those who had used the internet longer and more frequently. Initial results from a study of survey responses to the National Geographic Society's website in the fall of 1998, from 35,000 Americans, 5000 Canadians and 15,000 others, showed that (1) high e-mail contact does not reduce other forms of interaction; (2) younger people used e-mail for friends, near and far; (3)older people used e-mail for kin, near and far; (4) women used e-mail more with kin at a distance; but (5) overall, communication frequencies form men and women were basically the same for all media. Respondents to the UCLA (2000) study indicate that their use of the internet helps to create and maintain relationship as well as communicate

with the family. The two most popular internet activities reported by users were web surfing/browsing (81.7 percent) and using e-mail (81.6 percent). Most (89 percent) of the parents in the study reported that their children spent about the same time with their friends since they started using internet, 4 percent indicated more time and 7 percent indicated less time. While 27.5 percent reported spending no time on the Internet together with other household members, 47.1 percent reported doing so at least some time each week. Overall, 91.8 percent indicate no change in time members of the household spend together since becoming connected to the Internet. On average, Internet users feel that internet has slightly increase the number of people regularly contacted, and extent of communicating with family and friends; 26.2 percent reported having online friends (on average, almost 13 friends) that they never met, and 12.4 percent have met in person someone they first met online (on average 5.6 such new friendship). A 2002 AOL (American On Line) survey of 5700 teenagers and parents of teens reported that 81 percent of teens aged 12-17 use the Internet to e-mail friends or relatives, and 70 percent use it for instant messaging; for teens aged 18-19, usage rises to 91 percent and 83 percent respectively.

Data Related to Internet in Indonesia

Novistiar's analysis (2010) on Indonesian internet data shows that the number of Internet users in Indonesia is growing at a lightning speed. From 2000 to 2009, Internet users have grown from 2 million to 30 million users, a 1,400% increase in the last 9 years. Even though Indonesia is now ranked 11th in the world for the number of Internet users, only about 12.3% of its population has access to the Internet. The number of Internet users, especially those who access the Internet using their mobile phone, is projected to grow at an even faster rate in the future. The cost to access the Internet has dropped significantly for Indonesians in the last 2 years. Most Indonesians can now have access to the Internet using their mobile phone for only \$7.7 per month. By 2014, the number of Internet users in Indonesia is projected to reach 150 million. Internet users are still concentrated in Jakarta, the capital city, and other big cities. With 30 million Internet users as of the end of 2009, Indonesia is the 5th largest Internet market in Asia (after China, Japan, India, and South Korea).

He also adds that the number of Internet users in Indonesia is growing really fast (the highest growth among Asia countries after China), especially the number of users who use their mobile phone to access the Internet. In five years, about more than half of the Indonesian population or 150 million people are projected to have access to the Internet (most of them through their mobile phone). Compared to the population (not Internet users) of Singapore (4.8 million), Malaysia (27 million), South Korea (48.6 million), Thailand (67 million), Vietnam (86 million), and Philippine (90 million), it is clear that the number of Internet users in Indonesia will be significantly higher than the number of Internet users in those countries. Similar to other emerging online markets, Internet in Indonesia has younger audiences. According to comScore, about 73% of Internet population in Indonesia is between 15 – 34 years old. In addition, only 36% of Internet users in Indonesia is a woman. The remaining Indonesians access the Internet in Internet Kiosk. Those who can't afford to pay for monthly subscription fee will go to Internet kiosk and pay an hourly fee. According to a study conducted by Yahoo and Taylor Nelson Sofres (TNS) Indonesia, about 53% of Indonesians access the Internet in internet kiosks.

Internet Use

Internet users in Indonesia spend about 17.2 hours online per month (comScore Media Metrix). According to a survey conducted by Nielsen Indonesia, most Indonesians use the Internet for checking email (42%), reading newspaper (39%), searching for information about products or services (29%), reading magazines (27%), and chatting (23%). A study by comScore shows only 50% of Indonesian Internet users do online shopping and they spend only 1% on their online time for shopping. Clearly, online shopping is still not the main reason for Indonesians to go online.

While Indonesians are still cautious in using the Internet for shopping, there are very enthusiastic to online social networking. 28 million Indonesians have account(s) with Facebook, making them the 3rd largest Facebook users in the world. As of June 2010, Indonesians also produced the 3rd highest number of tweets in the world. It is not surprising at all that 87% of Indonesians does social networking and they spend 32.6% of their online time in websites such as Facebook and Twitter (comScore).

In addition to social networking, Indonesians spend significant hours in front of their computer/mobile phone watching online videos (second only after China). A recent study by Nielsen's Online practice found that online video is most broadly watched among online consumers in China and Indonesia, where consumers are 26% more likely to use video. The number of Indonesians who watch online videos on computer at work and on their mobile phone ranked number 13 and 2 in the world. With the high popularity of social networking sites in Indonesia, online gaming is also getting a good traction among Indonesian Internet users. 44.6% of them play online games and they spend 2.9% on their online time on these sites (comScore).

Indonesians also enjoy sharing their photos with their friends. Many online Indonesians (63.9%) upload and share their photos in sites such as [flickr](#) and they, on average, 3.5% of their online time in photo sharing sites (comScore). According to comScore, about 63.1% of Indonesian Internet users uses the Internet to find news or information and they spend, on average, 4.7% of their online time for news and information.

Symbolic Interactionism Perspective on Internet Communication

According to Littlejohn (2002:144), for symbolic interactionism theorists, meaning is created and sustained by interaction in the social group. Interaction establishes, maintains and changes certain conventions – roles, norms, rules, and meanings- within a social group or culture, and this conventions in turn define the reality of the culture itself. Language assumes special importance in these theories, as language is the container within which reality resides.

More to this theory, an original book of Symbolic Interactionism by George Herbert Mead written by Herbert Blumer will be used. According to Blumer (1969:2), symbolic interactionism rests in the analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things at the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note in this world – physical objects, activity of others such as their command or requests and such situation as an individual encounters in his or her daily life. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from or arise out of , the social interaction that one has to follow. The third premise is that these meanings are

handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he or she encounters. Furthermore, there will be an analysis on Blumer's explanation on Mead's view that does not create scheme map theory of human society and only in implicit views: in meaning, social interaction and joint action.

Elaboration on Meaning

According to Blumer (1969:2), meaning is often ignored in many scientific, modern psychology and social thinking and considered less important. At the most, it is only regarded as neutral link among participation factors in human behavior and this behavior as a product of those factors. There is a tendency in psychology just to pay attention on factors such as stimuli, attitude, conscious and unconscious motives, various psychological inputs, perception and cognition and other things that form human behavior. Not to mention sociologist also only pay attention on social position, state of needs, social role, cultural direction, norm and values, social pressure, and group affiliation to explain human behavior. On both perspectives, meaning is often taken for granted or lost in the role of those strong factors. Instead, symbolic interactionism theory considers that meaning of the object is the main key. To make a meaning less important is considered as to falsify behavior in a study. Symbolic interactionism sees meanings emerged from the interaction process of human, as a social product or creation formed by activity definition when human interact. Therefore, in the context of communication by internet, it is so important to elaborate about meaning emerged from this communication.

In the analysis about communication via internet, gesture can not only be considered as a body position since the context is widened. In the internet world, gesture can be regular sentences which sometimes strengthened by addition of emotional sign such as emoticon (☺ ☹ ☺). If we looked at studies done before, it is true that internet communication has gone beyond explanation of symbolic interactionism by Blumer and Mead.

As explained by Reymers (2002) that meaning does not come by itself but emerge from interaction that directs behavior. This process is not direct but through interpretation process that open spaces for creativity, imagination and hope for social change.

One example: the case Prita Mulyasari, a woman who was jailed for allegedly defaming a hospital via an online complaint. The society responded in anger and demanded for her release. In this case, it may be different when the internet users only have understanding that there is someone they never know imprisoned because of defaming. If we dig more about this imprisonment news appeared on media, some internet users thought that email from Prita was just a hoax and has been answered by the hospital through mailing list as well. But when the meaning has been developed into understanding that the one who was jailed was a mother with two small kids, the society responded so furiously via social media network. This was covered by mass media, became a national issue and later led to a social movement.

Elaboration on Social Interpretation

According to Blumer (1969:65), Mead identified two forms of interaction level such as: non-symbolic and symbolic interactionism. In non-symbolic interactionism, someone responds directly on gesture or action from someone else. Here they interpret each other and act based on meanings from interpretation. It is clear that symbolic interactionism involves interpretation or determined meaning from act or sign to someone else. In addition to that, a definition is also involved as the sending of indication to someone else to act. Through this process, one individual adapts one's act on someone else's action and gives clues to someone else as well. There is one thing to note in symbolic interactionism that it is a formative process in its own way. Participant in symbolic interactionism has to develop his/her own behavior with contents interpretation from someone else's actions. As a person that considers other people action, one has to hold, form, and adapt his or her purposes, wants and attitudes and to determine norm fitness, values and group direction for situations that was developed by other people action. Psychological and sociological factors are not substitution for interpretative process. Both can be use as completion of interpretative process and symbolic interactionism has to be studied in its own way.

In internet communication, a user will start one's activity in virtual world by interpreting what or who is in front of him or her and then responds with actions. It is obvious that one will search for a comfortable interaction when joining a mailing list group on the internet. When he or she joins, the way other people interact in the group will be interpreted. When he or she feels that the way of interaction in that group fits him/her, he or she will try to be involved with the discussion about certain topics by following rules in that group. Furthermore, one may increase interaction when the group plans to have meeting in personal. On contrary, when one felt not comfortable with the way other people interact, he or she will withdraw the membership.

In addition, the interpreted gesture that becomes a meaning also results in different social interaction in the context of near and far social relationship. In some field observation that was also supported by previous studies, communication by internet makes less distance to person who is far from the individual but at the same time also makes more distance to the person near the individual. One example is AOL (American On Line) studies in year 2000 that showed that internet user make more interaction with other relative (who did not live at the same house) with 30% and this was compared to communication with parents (who were probably still in the same house) with only 23%. It is obvious that meaning in internet communication has different output than what was predicted.

Elaboration on Joint Action

Joint action refers to the larger collective form of action that is constituted by the fitting together to the lines of behavior of the separate participants (Blumer, 1969:70). Joint action covers simple collaboration from two individuals until complex alliance of big organization actions. It cannot be separated to be general or same behavior from a part of participants since every participant has different position, acts from that position and involves in different action. This means fitting actions instead of similarities that regulate joint actions. This alliance does not happen through mechanical mix or random adaptation, but through participants who fit their actions together. First, by identifying social actions to be done and second by interpreting and

defining everybody's action in creating joint act. By identifying social action or joint act, the participant can orient him or herself. He/she has a key to interpreting other peoples' actions and directs the action toward other people. Then the participant also interprets actions of one person to the other person. They all must ensure the kind of actions done by others, plan the action and make indication about this action one another.

Example in this part is the creation of online cause in Facebook that supports Prita who was jailed for allegedly defaming a hospital via an online complaint. The social action was an effort to collect sympathy from Facebook users and later had extraordinary responses since this preliminary action was interpreted so well. In less than two weeks, an online petition of more than 300,000 users in Facebook who demanded for Prita release was created. This issue becomes much bigger when at the same time the Indonesian presidential election began. One president candidate visited the prison, another one demanded for the release and the current president asked the police chief and state attorney to examine the case. Later, Prita status was changed to city prisoner while waiting for court settlement. In this case, the interpreted meanings opened people's creativity that led to social change and at the end the internet communication made its users who never met before can interact more intensively to create pressure group.

CONCLUSION

The vast internet use brings implications to human life, especially social interaction. Some negative impacts appear but its positive impacts are more significant. These two paradoxes are still open for debate. On pessimistic perspectives, many concern that internet communication make our life worse than before since it creates an addiction to its users, less time to interact face to face, creates indecency, makes students out of school and other negative impacts. On contrary, optimistic perspectives counter those perspectives with arguments that internet communication leads to more personal interaction, complements relationship in real world, more family relationship, maintains friendship, and belief that internet communication brings life better. However, those data was taken in US instead of Indonesia. In here, many of us still focus on user profiles, form of use, internet content and not on the impact of its interaction yet. This research is aimed to do that purpose; however, the survey is still in the process that it cannot reveal the final result in near future. While processing to get that result, what happens now in the field is analyzed by symbolic interactionism approach. This theory is chosen due to its closeness to explain social interaction in society.

In this paper, three elements of symbolic interactionism are used to explain the phenomena i.e.: meaning, social interaction and joint action. Meaning, mostly forgotten in the analysis in some researches, has vital role in the analysis. With the existence of meaning emerged from interaction, it directs behavior. A certain meaning that is differently understood by some people can change the society behavior in not very long time and leads to an unpredictable action. Social interaction is not instantly developed but through process that is started from interpretation to other people's gesture (which is different in virtual world), arranges action that will be taken and communicates them to other people. The result of this interpretation will determine the kind of later action. In this analysis, there is a phenomenon of "more distance to people near us and less distance to people far from us". Regarding joint action, this happens when some member of society fit their actions at the same time, plan and create indication of action. The result from this joint action is an interest group or a pressure group to face something that is considered as having unsimilar values than what the group has. Generally, more researches are needed to explore deeper on the impact of internet communication to social interaction. The result of these researches will contribute to communication science.

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