

ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING USE OF COLLEGE STUDENTS:
A VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY APPROACH

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Abstract

Paul, Baker & Cochram (2012) have argued that the Online Social Networks (OSNs) have permeated all generations of Internet users, becoming a prominent communications tool, particularly in the student community. This has led to a rise in questions about the impact of OSN on academic performance and the possibility of using it as an effective teaching tool. There is a little have been studied for Indonesian context regarding the role of OSN, especially in qualitative studies. This study aimed to investigate the same phenomenon qualitatively by using the virtual ethnography research approach. The sample of the research will be taken using purposive sampling method from undergraduate students living in Bekasi, Indonesia.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Today the use of the internet has become an integral part of the lives of the younger generation¹⁹. Social networking sites are the latest online communication tools that enable users to create a public or semi-public profile, allowing the user to create and view social networking sites of their own and one that belong to other users and interact with people in their network²⁰. Online Social Network Sites (hereinafter-abbreviated OSN) such as Twitter and Facebook alone has over 100 million users among themselves, many of whom are younger users and growing up (emerging adults). Although research on the use of Social networking sites are growing rapidly at this time, but there are still some unanswered questions related to what the user is actually conducted in these sites, with whom they interact and how

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¹⁹ Gemmill, E., & Peterson, M. (2006). Technology use among college students: Implications for student affairs professionals. *NASPA Journal*, 43(2), 280–300. Jones, S. (2002). The Internet goes to college. Washington D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project (http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_College_Report.pdf). Lenhart, A., & Madden, M. (2007). Social networking websites and teens: An overview. Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project Retrieved June 21, 2013, from http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_SNS_Data_Memo_Jan_2007.pdf. Subrahmanyam, K., & Greenfield, P. M. (2008). Communicating online: Adolescent relationships and the media. *The Future of Children: Children and Media Technology*, 18, 119–146.

²⁰ Boyd, D., & Ellison, N. B. (2007a). Social network sites: Definition, history and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13 article 11.

their Social networking sites connect with their other online platform (like instant messaging) and their day-to-day offline activities.²¹

Furthermore, because of the potential to interact with other users they know (known users) and to meet and make friends with strangers in these OSN sites, it is important to examine the nature of OSN users in order to obtain an understanding about how online communication related to the development of the younger generation.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The purpose of this study was to explore (in the early stages, because this is a pilot research in Bekasi and surrounding areas) Online Social Networking use among young generation (in the context of this research is the college undergraduate student in the region and surrounding Bekasi, West Java, Indonesia) and made a short description of the relationship between online and offline networks as well as the possibility of an advantage towards the students' academic performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Subrahmanyam et al (2008), communication forums on the Internet numbers a huge amount in terms of both quantity and type, including a variety of applications such as instant messaging, email and chat rooms. In addition, there are also sites such as blogs, social networking sites, photo and video sharing such as YouTube and virtual reality environments like Second Life. Teenagers are very intensive Internet users than the general population and they use the Internet extensively to communicate with each other.²²

In order to understand the role of online communication in the context of the development of the younger generation, we can use a theoretical framework in which the users of online interactive forums such as chat rooms, blogs and social networking sites construct their online environment together (co-construction model).²³ The main implications of the model of co-construction are the online and offline

²¹ Boyd, D., & Ellison, N. B. (2007b). Social network sites. [Special section]. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1). Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12, 1143–1168. Valkenburg, P., Peter, J., & Schouten, A. P. (2006). Friend networking sites and their relationship to adolescents' well-being and social self-esteem. *Cyber Psychology & Behavior*, 9, 584–590.

²² Boneva, B. S., Quinn, A., Kraut, R. E., Kiesler, S., & Shklovski, I. (2006). Teenage communication in the instant messaging era. In R. Kraut M. Brynin & S. Kiesler (Eds.), *Information technology at home* (pp. 612–672). Oxford University Press. Gross, E. F. (2004). Adolescent Internet use: What we expect, what teens report. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 25, 633–649. Clark, D. J., Frith, K. H., & Demi, A. S. (2004). The physical, behavioral, and psychosocial consequences of Internet use in college students. *Computers, Informatics, Nursing*, 22, 153–161. Gemmill, E., & Peterson, M. (2006). Technology use among college students: Implications for student affairs professionals. *NASPA Journal*, 43(2), 280–300. Jones, S. (2002). The Internet goes to college. Washington D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project (http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_College_Report.pdf [June, 2008]).

²³ Subrahmanyam, K., & Greenfield, P. M. (2008). Communicating online: Adolescent relationships and the media. The Future of Children: *Children and Media Technology*, 18, 119–146. Subrahmanyam, K., Šmahel, D., & Greenfield, P. M. (2006). Connecting developmental processes to the Internet: Identity presentation and sexual exploration in online teen chatrooms. *Developmental Psychology*, 42, 1–12. Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet*. NY: Simon & Schuster, as quoted in Subrahmanyam et al (2008).

world psychologically related. The consequences, we can expect that the Internet users bring people and their problems from their offline world into their online world. This condition, according to Subrahmanyam *et al* (2008), is contrary to previous opinion stating that the Internet allows users to separate between online world and offline world.²⁴ The development of psychology research (developmental psychology research) on the online behavior of young people can support the claim that the online and offline world actually related to one another.

In the context of the relationship between online and offline world, research shows that teenagers use instant messaging to communicate generally with their offline friends about events that happened in school, gossip and the like.²⁵ In another study on preadolescent and adolescent in the Netherlands, 80% of Internet users reported using the Internet for maintaining a network with friends.²⁶ In addition there are a number of research that focuses on cyber bullying that reinforces the claim that the relationship between online and offline world is related.²⁷ For example, Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, and Finkelhor (2006) found that nearly half of the adolescent Internet users in their study knew the online bully in person before the cyber bullying incident occurred. With regard to social networking sites, teens, particularly girls, reported using the sites to keep in contact with peers from their offline lives, either to make plans with friends that they see often or to keep in touch with friends they rarely see (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). The girls in this study also reported using social networking sites to reinforce pre-existing friendships whereas boys reported using them to flirt and make new friends.

Adolescents' developmental concerns include formulating identity, adjusting to sexuality, and establishing intimate relations with peers and romantic partners²⁸, and recent research indicates that they use online contexts in the service of these important concerns.

²⁴ Byam, N. K. (1995). The emergence of community in computer-mediated communication. In S. G. Jones (Ed.), *Cybersociety: Computer-mediated communication and community* (pp. 138–163). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, as quoted in Subrahmanyam *et al* (2008). McKenna, K. Y., & Bargh, J. A. (2000). Plan 9 from cyberspace: The implications of the Internet for personality and social psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 4, 57–75, as quoted in Subrahmanyam *et al* (2008).

²⁵ Boneva, B. S., Quinn, A., Kraut, R. E., Kiesler, S., & Shklovski, I. (2006). Teenage communication in the instant messaging era. In R. Kraut M. Brynin & S. Kiesler (Eds.), *Information technology at home* (pp. 612–672). Oxford University Press. Gross, E. F., Juvonen, J., & Gable, S. L. (2002). Internet use and well-being in adolescence. *Journal of Social Issues*, 58(1), 75–90.

²⁶ Valkenburg, P., & Peter, J. (2007). Preadolescents' and adolescents' online communication and their closeness to friends. *Developmental Psychology*, 43, 267–277.

²⁷ Subrahmanyam, Kaveri, Stephanie M. Reich, Natalia Waechter & Guadalupe Espinoza (2008). Online and offline social networks: Use of social networking sites by emerging adults. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 29, 420–433.

²⁸ Brown, B. (2004). Adolescents' relationships with peers. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp. 363–394), 2nd edition New York: Wiley. Erikson, E. (1959). Identity and the life cycle. New York: W. W. Norton, as quoted in Subrahmanyam *et al* (2008). Weinstein, E., & Rosen, E. (1991). The development of adolescent sexual intimacy: Implications for counseling. *Adolescence*, 26, 331–339, quoted in Subrahmanyam *et al* (2008).

There are two studies about online teen chat room who analyzed 12 thousand words from 1.100 participants that found identity presentation (Subrahmanyam et al., 2006), partner selection (Šmahel & Subrahmanyam, 2007), and sexual comments (Subrahmanyam *et al*, 2006) is the most common conversation in the chat rooms. A qualitative study shows that American and Austria teens using online chat rooms to develop their gender identity and ethnicity (Waechter, 2005, 2006). A similar issue of teenager development also found in a study of another online forum, i.e. weblogs, written by teens (Subrahmanyam, Garcia, Harsono, Lin, & Lipana, in press, as quoted in Subrahmanyam et al, 2008). Teen bloggers make usernames and user pictures for self-presentation purposes and use their blog entries to show friends their own age and their daily lives. In addition, they use their blog entries to create narratives about themselves and to reflect on the people and events in their lives. Seeing the world of online users who are psychologically connected with their offline world allows us to begin to believe in the existence of the relationship between online communication and teenager development. . There are a significant numbers of researches in supporting this claim has been conducted on adolescents, and it is still debatable whether such connectedness exists among emerging college students.

METHOD

Participants

There are 40 informants in this study. The entire informants are active students in one of the famous private universities in the Bekasi area. This private university chosen because almost all students on the campus have high socioeconomic status (this based on the amount of tuition fee that according to the information is the most expensive among all universities in Indonesia). Therefore, with a background of such, it assumed that the majority of students has a regular internet connection and has a device to connect to the internet all the time (almost 90% have a Smartphone with Internet access). Criteria for selection of informants are female and male sex in proportion (half female and half male).

Procedure

Of the 50 informants that recruited via online (via facebook researchers), as many as 40 students agreed to be interviewed in writing and the rest is online through facebook chat. Type of interview is in-depth interview and performed with an average duration of 60 to 90 minutes in real time. This study uses Virtual Ethnography approach, so ideally the whole interview done online via OSN (Facebook). Having conducted in-depth interviews, further qualitative coding of data carried out. The selected coding technique is the Value Coding. Value coding is a data coding applications in qualitative research that reflects a value (value), attitude (attitude) and faith (belief) that can represent the participant's perspective or worldview. Value coding appropriate for all qualitative research but specifically the most appropriate for the type of qualitative research that seeks to explore the cultural values, intrapersonal, experiences and actions of participants in a case study.²⁹

Semi-Structure Interview List of Questions

For the purposes of the interview, 8 questions provided as follows:

- (1) When was your first encounter in using OSN?
- (2) What factors behind your preference of OSN?
- (3) Generally speaking, how do you use OSN for academic purpose?

²⁹ Saldana, Johnny. (2009). *the Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: SAGE, 89-93.

- (4) What benefit (s) you have been provided by using OSN on your academic performance?
- (5) Is there any negative impact (s) of OSN for your academic performance?
- (6) Can you describe how you spend your time in your OSN usage on daily/weekly/monthly usage, type of gadgets, average cost spending on monthly basis?
- (7) Why you prefer to use one type of OSN compared with other type?
- (8) Do you have any specific preference in online communities? If any, please describe your answer!

The lists of questions above are general questions and then at the time of the interview the researcher dig more by probing the questions.

RESULTS

First encounter in using OSN: Junior High School. To get a snapshot of how long college students' have been using the Internet relative to their other activities, participants asked on when was exactly their initial encounter with OSN. Their responses varied but mostly responded it started when they were in junior high schools. This shows that they generally have known OSN for a long time. If we assumed their age when the interview for this research take place, the average still sits in second year and third in college, their age range was 18-20 years, they have been accustomed to using OSN about more than 5 years. Familiarity in the use of OSN can be seen when they were interviewed in real time via facebook chat. Their typing speed is relatively fast compared to the speed of the interviewer and this resulted in a relatively long time waiting for them when doing an online chat via facebook.

Reason to use OSN: Simplicity and user interface experience. At the point of the question regarding the factors, which are the reason for choosing OSN, the informants have similar view in at least two aspects: simplicity and user interface. It is as expressed by one informant, Adhysta: ... "the factor behind my preference to choose OSN is actually the curiosity....because on that time, my friends were busy to talk about Internet and OSN. They said it was so simple and user interface is good. Then, I tried to use it. Besides, by using OSN I can benefit for my school assignment..". While another informant, Gina, answered more detail: ... "I like using twitter, there are some reasons why. First, most of my friends are using twitter. It is the simplest OSN to use. We can tweet, retweet and favorite people's tweet. We can also send pictures, links and so on. I m using smart phone and it is so much easier using twitter. There are only four parts in twitter: timeline, mention, discover and profile, if being differentiated with facebook, by using facebook via smart phone will be more complicated and difficult....". When asked about their preferences on the type of OSN, generally the answer is almost the same for the informants: facebook and twitter, but the reasons are varied. Female informants have similar options for the first rank: twitter. The reason, twitter is more concise, private and seems more 'fashionable'. When asked to answer more detailed what is meant by 'fashionable', women with a twitter preference talks with a straightforward answer, because a lot of public figures (celebrities) use it, so it does not seem 'common' like other OSN (facebook).

OSN for academic Purpose: academic file sharing, subscribe to academic accounts/ mailing list, online discussion, consult thesis. To find out if there are academic benefits in the use of OSN, commonly the informants responses confirm / acknowledge its benefits. The benefits of OSN for students include sharing their academic files that can help them in lectures, sign up to join in the website / account / mailing list that contains academic materials, engage in online discussions as well as for consultation on thesis. One of the informants answered this point as follows: ... "I think OSN in general and twitter specifically, academically useful for me and my college mates. We can communicate, share, and discuss

things that related to academic things by using OSN. We can also get to know a lot of things that are actually happen in the other parts of the world by using OSN, for instance, there are news' account (for example KOMPAS.com) did tweet or post about something that are actually useful in academic learning, then I retweet or favorite the post from KOMPAS, then the other friend who did follow me, they can also know of mine who did follow me, they can also know even though they did not follow KOMPAS's account...". Although the informants answer to this question confirm the usefulness of OSN for academic purposes such as expressed above, but some informants answer impress that OSN is actually use for searching entertainment purposes and eliminate the stress of college routines, such as response to one informant, Laras: ..."in terms of my GPA, I don't think using OSN (twitter) can increase my GPA significantly. OSN (twitter) helps, but not much..."*.*

Negative Impact of OSN: addiction, distraction, waste of time. All informants that gone to in depth interview agreed that - beside its benefits, especially in the field of academic-OSN also have a negative effect / bad for students' academic performance. This quote from the interviews with the informant named Laras could represent opinions of all informants:*" sometime OSN distract me, OSN takes a lot of my time. I can't see my phone in the morning or in the night without thinking I have to check my twitter account – even when I was in my class sessions.... "*.

CONCLUSION

This study is not yet completed (on-going research), so it is rather difficult to give a conclusive conclusion. In addition to still ongoing, analysis of data using qualitative coding analysis with value coding techniques have not done in a holistic manner to the entire interview results obtained from this study informants. Still, at least there is a pattern of tentative (temporary) which has been linked conclusively to approach the phenomenon under study. Conclusions that can be given at this stage are as follows:

1. Interaction using OSN that conducted by the students that become informants of this study is relatively long and this certainly makes research on this subject remains attractive given the informants familiarity with object of research become richer.
2. Related to students' perceptions about OSN features available in the market, generally there are similarities between the opinion that the existing OSN is more advanced and easier to use. This simplicity makes OSN has more number of users on a daily basis. This opens an exciting research opportunities for researchers and communications media, especially for social media researchers.
3. According to the model of co-construction, which one of the main concepts used in this study, it can be seen that the concept of 'connectedness' between the offline and online worlds are not different among the students relative to the offline and online world preteens and teens. The online world is a mirrors the students offline world. This claim would need to be deepened further in advanced research so the results obtained are more comprehensive, conclusive and valid.
4. Last and most importantly, through the opinions of the informants of this study, it can be seen that - despite the dissatisfaction and negative claims about the benefits of OSN in the academic field - OSN has a relatively good impact for the academic context. However, this claim must be reconfirm and verify for further researches.

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