Cosmopolitan Cultural Identity in Online Media: An Intercultural Communication Study of Online-Gamer Youth

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Abstract
This study endeavors in identifying the universal principles of online-game players in the multicultural context which eventually yields a cosmopolitan cultural identity. The multicultural context is clearly reflected on the users of online games, particularly those who play Massively Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) whose number of users keeps increasing in Indonesia, indicating there are networks and massive interconnectivity which make Indonesia a part of globalization. New media has opened the gate for the digital revolution, which does not merely lead to the convergence of mainstream media but also the improvement of interactivity enabling every audience of the new media to participate in the digital world. One of the interactive convergence is online games in which everyone can participate regardless of their physical boundaries such as location or country territory. However, the players of MMORPG must always improve their digital characters. The customization of characters is related to the identity they build in online games. This research uses qualitative method and in-depth interview to three advanced youth gamers. The result of this current research shows that the cosmopolitan cultural identity formed by the online-gamers has different characters than that of other groups.

Keywords: cosmopolitan, intercultural communication, MMORPG, teenager, online-game

Introduction
In the present era of globalization, the identity can no longer be perceived merely as an isolated entity with a rigid characteristic. The problems of personal identity have mixed with both local and world culture; the identities now possess universal principles. The globalization is important to discuss because it has given a significant influence on
the characteristic of human social interaction. According to Giddens (2001), globalization also contains many dimensions such as politics, culture, etc. One of the thoughts concerning globalization discussed in this paper is that the globalization is a cultural process.

Tomlinson defines cultural globalization as the increasing growth of a complex network of cultural interconnectivity and interdependency which characterize modern social life. The global cultural stream is controlled by international media companies which apply new communication technology to create societies and identities.

**Problems**

Referring to what was proposed by Tomlinson, that the globalization is the increasing network of complex cultural interconnectivity and interdependency characterizing modern social life, the network is also related to the existing media convergence. In terms of media convergence, Indonesia shows a significant growth, particularly in terms of the virtual world. In 2017, We Are Social, a research company, claimed Indonesia as the country having the most significant growth of Internet users in the world (Pratama, 2017). The data indicate that the penetration rate of Indonesian youth aged 20-24 and 25-29 years-old touches 80 percent (Sugiharto, 2016).

The most used internet applications in Indonesia are email, IM, social network websites, search engine, online news, blog, and online games (Hindarto, 2009). Nowadays, the online game is not solely a means of entertainment and pastime activities. It could also be a social activity which enables the users to connect and eventually find communities. Concerning the genre, one of the most favorite online games in Indonesia is the *Role-Playing Game* (RPG).

The online game generally liked in Indonesia is *Massively Online Role-Playing Game* (MMORPG). In fact, Indonesia is noted as the country with the highest number of MMORPG players. Basically, the players of MMORPG must always develop their digital character. The forming of the character is related to the personal identity they want to present in the online game. Since MMORPG is a game participated by many players (multiplayer), the players themselves aren’t merely originated from one single country. Every player of MMORPG is a part of the world gamers’ community. There are hundreds, even thousands, of players interacting in MMORPG. The interaction is facilitated by the chat feature so that the players can interact with others based on their motives such as to make friends, complete the missions, and exchange items.

Intercultural communication is established very intensely through MMORPG, particularly in the games using the international server. The users from all countries communicate live or real-time. Therefore, the players must develop universal cultural identity since it must be approved and understood by all MMORPG players. According to Lamont and Aksartova (in Kendall, Woodward, and Skrbis, 2009) it could be regarded as cosmopolitanism. Lamon and Aksartova see cosmopolitanism as the cultural
repertoire of particular universalism understood by individuals as the ownership of equal humanism. It means that an individual is bound to other human beings on a universal culture regardless of national borders, nationalism, and etc. There is a shared moral bond which becomes the reference to interact with others and to perceive themselves as parts of a shared culture.

Cosmopolitanism refers to attitudes and practices associated with conscious openness to the world and cultural differences within which appears what was called the cosmopolitan class proposed by Kanter (in Kendall, Woodward, and Skrbis, 2009) as a social class defined by their ability to control resources and to operate widely beyond borders and territories. Hannerz argues that a cosmopolitan is open to other cultures (either aesthetically or intellectually), develops dynamic ability and interdependency to locality (there is no cosmopolitan without locality), and possesses the consciousness of the individual’s initial standpoint (where the individual is originated).

As MMORPG is international so that it demands the understanding of international context, a player of the online game also subjects to universal principles acting as the universal bridge connecting players from different cultural groups. This knowledge is important because MMORPGs bring many consequences. Besides exposing people to cyberbullying (see https://duniagames.co.id/news/3105-surveymembuktikan-paragamer-wanita-seringjadi-korban-bully-di-game-online), MMORPGs have also taken lives. There have been incidents happening because the youth—as the predominant group of online gamers—have no idea how to separate their real, personal identities from the virtual ones—let alone the fact that MMORPG has the potential to make the users addicted.

Besides being played simultaneously—resulting in the absence of time boundaries—an online game also demands commitment from the players, particularly when it is played together as a team. It is known as Real Time Strategy, which eventually generates a strong attachment to the continuity of the games. There are cases of players getting the heart attack and cardiac failure because of lack of rest (50 hours of non-stop playing), the blockage of blood vessels triggered by too much time sitting. In addition, there are several suicide cases because the players cannot discern which is real and which is virtual (Yulianson, 2016) (see http://techno.okezone.com/read/2010/08/18/326/363988/waspadai-efek-samping-candu-mmorpg).

Based on the explanation above, the objective of this research and community service is to answer this following question: "How are the characteristics of the cosmopolitan cultural community of the online-gamers of MMORPG?"

**Research Objective**

This research is aimed at identifying the characteristic of cosmopolitan cultural identity appearing on the online-game players.
Literature Review

Cultural Identity

The Cultural Identity Theory is one of the theories in communication studies which emphasizes on the use of communication process by an individual in constructing and negotiating one's own cultural identity group in certain context. In the beginning, the theory was based on the perspectives of interpretive theories, which describes the process of cultural identity without giving criticism. Mary Jane Collier and Milt Thomas combine communication ethnography and social construction before offering several ideas (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

First, they argue that the message conveyed by an individual during the interaction contains several types of cultural identities, namely national, racial, ethnic, social class, sex and gender, political preferences, and religion. Since an individual possesses many identities, each voice in a certain identity group does not speak in the same manner to other people from other cultural groups and is not acknowledged as a part of the other’s identity group.

Secondly, the research of ethnic identification conducted by Collier in the mid 80’s about the communication process among college students found that similarities and differences between an individual and his peer are the factors influencing how the cultural identity is displayed by that individual.

The third important point is the scope variation or the prevalence of how the form of cultural identity is displayed by an individual. The fourth point is who subsequently construct and shape the cultural identity and how it is communicated. This research found two important processes, namely avowal, and ascription. Avowal is an individual's perspective about the identity of a group, while ascription refers to how one refers to other person’s identity. The most common form of ascription is the stereotype stamped to other groups.

Identity Negotiation Theory (Identity Communication Theory) proposed by Stella Ting Toomey illustrates how identity negotiates in social interaction, particularly in intercultural interactions. Cultural and ethnic identity is learned during this social interaction. Cultural identity is the identity connected to the wider cultural groups, such as those bound by universal religious values, state territory, certain organization, and, even, age group, whereas ethnic identity is the identity in which there is shared history (history of origin), including the similarity of nation, race, religion, or language.

Cultural and ethnic identity is determined by values and uniquenesses. Values are every evaluation extracted from cultural beliefs. For example, there are cultures emphasizing more in communal than individual values and vice versa. The uniqueness is the feeling of a strong bond. In other words, the identity appearing is the one based on the bigger groups and values produced by the interaction with that group. When an individual has successfully been able to balance the intercultural interaction, one has become what is called by Ting Toomey as Cultural Transformer. This point is reached
after achieving what is called intercultural competence. The cultural competence consists of three components—knowledge, mindfulness, and skill. Identity knowledge is indicated by the understanding of ethnic/cultural identity and the ability to comprehend the needs of others. Mindfulness is marked by the readiness to face the change of perspectives. Whereas, negotiation skill refers to the ability of the identity to negotiate through the ability to see, hear, sense empathy, feel nonverbal sensitivity, display politeness, reframe, and collaborate. The effective negotiation identity is obtained when the two involved parties feel they are understood, appreciated, and respected by each other.

**Cosmopolitan Cultural Identity**

The high probability of cultural encounter in the era of globalization has forced the emergence of what is termed by Immanuel Kant as cosmopolitanism (John, 1998). Cosmopolitanism is a perspective of international relation which aspires to develop an institutionalized world society which stands firmly to norms. Since it is perceived as an ideal condition of world society, this view is often claimed as idealism. The definition of cosmopolitanism itself is the shared ownership of the world according to universal principles (e.g. Sobre-Denton, 2011; John, 1998). Cosmopolitanism can also be interpreted as the equality of moral values of all men as well as the moral obligation which is not only limited to the state. According to Kant, these obligations include the protection of human rights, the distribution of global natural resources, and the manifestation of democracy.

In this research, the cosmopolitan cultural identity is interpreted as the identity connected to cultural groups whose interaction patterns are regulated by the universal principles applied globally without being limited to state borders, religious values, organization, or certain age group.

**Digital Culture and Online Game Culture**

The acceleration of technological growth is widely benefited in various aspects of life, of which the communication technology is the vanguard. The significant linear development surely forces the industry to provide hardware and software and continuously innovate. The development of software in the digital world does not merely concern the technologies which help men to do jobs or answer their curiosity. In fact, the “industry” of the game is one of the important components which grows fastly together with the advancement of media technology. In fact, “games” is recorded in the history of communication technology development, which includes several forms and steps as follows (Brown, 2008):

1. Printed media, namely newspapers, periodicals, books, and telephone
2. Motion picture (without sound)
3. Sound recording
The games are so important in the media technology that at least three experts have explained the culture of online games (Kerr, 2006). The first is Johan Huizinga; a Dutch scholar, which affirmed that games had existed before the culture thrived, since various types of games emerged from society, from children’s games to competition, role-play, to spontaneous games. Huizinga defines “playing” as “an involuntary activity or job conducted in a limited time and place, according to loose yet binding rules.” However, Huizinga at least limits the concept of playing as something outside the regular life, which is not related to the desire to obtain material benefits, limited in certain time and space, bound to rules, involuntary, and produces its own social group. For Huizinga, games are conducted in a limited area. All of the moves are that of playing and it is conducted in a playing field such as an arena, card deck, venue, screen, and etc.

Another expert, Roger Caillois (2001) defines playing as free activity and is bound to particular space and time. He noted that playing and games are different from the reality through "the rules." Caillois has proposed six qualifications: freedom, separation (in space and time from outside events), rules, the uncertainty of the result, non-productivity, and trust (among the players). These four qualifications are adopted by the online game creators by adding this following point: playing category according to the pay rate of those who follow the rules.

Caillois has also identified four modes of games: competition (agon), coincidence (alea), simulation (mimicry), and vertigo (ilinx). Agon exists in the games where the condition was fixed that the opponents have the same opportunity depending on one’s perseverance, such as in football and chess. Alea can be found in lottery and roulette whose winners are determined by fate and dice. Mimicry, or imitation, exists when a player makes other players believe that one is a different person, such as in role-playing games. While inlix refers to the demolition of order, such as in carousels where one can be dizzy for a while.

The third theory is proposed by Brian Sutton-Smith, who argues that games are shaped as other cultural forms. It is why games cannot be interpreted neutrally, and it is impossible to separate the existence (player) and their own experience. Sutton-Smith defines the diversity of the games through nine different forms of games: subjective games, solitary games, fun games, informal-social games, role-playing games, show,
celebration and festival, contest (games and sports), and risky games. In digital technology, there are at least four most favorite games: solitary games, role-playing games, informal social games, and competition.

The experts in digital games define a game as the “system where the players involve in artificial conflicts, defined by rules, which result in countable results.” They follow the concept of Huizinga that games are conducted in a closed “arena” to refer to “limited place and time created by the games.” However, in digital games, this place or closed circle can be open simultaneously. Therefore, in the digital domain, a game is defined as something “separated” from reality and operating its own rules, influenced by what is done by players, and exists in general cultures.

**Online Games and Electronic Role-Playing Game**

Electronic Role-Playing Game is a genre based on "a story quest," in which there are stories of quest and the users have certain roles to play. The characters of the players are equipped with various attributes and abilities. This genre was originated from a game launched by TSR Inc. in 1974, namely Dungeon & Dragons, a Role-Playing Game (RPG) in which the players take roles as healer, warrior, and wizard. Generally, fantasy is the favorite themes of RPG, followed by science fiction. The types of RPG are Single Player RPGs and Multiplayer RPGs.

According to Montola (2007 in Drachen and Hitchens, 2008), role-playing games is an interactive process in defining and redefining an imaginary world of games, conducted by a group of participants (players) subject to an existing power structure. The general characteristics usually exist in an RPG are storytelling with rules (story with rules within), rules (the rules themselves), characters (the character of the player), and a game master (the outside party managing the players).

**Research Methods**

The paradigm of this research is constructivism. By understanding the perspectives of the research informants, this study is able to perceive the cosmopolitan cultural identity of MMORPG online-gamers.

This study applies qualitative-descriptive approach using the in-depth interview as the data gathering technique. The informants of this research are three youths, MMORPG online-gamers, who have reached the top level in online games they play. The data are processed using the matrix, and transcripted and organized according to the general themes of this study.

**Findings**

Offering a shared fun with people living hundreds to thousands of kilometers away, online games rapidly become the favorite of digital media technology users. The players are willing to face many technical difficulties faced and prohibition from parents since
those things cannot be compared to the satisfaction gained everytime they finish each level, especially when their names are recorded in the list of greatest players either nationally or globally. Those things were admitted by an online gamer who said that he had once experienced the "addiction" phase because he had played too many online games in the internet cafe (warnet). At first, he was just trying to play the game. Yet he reached the phase of "curiosity" every time he passed each level. (Therefore, it is natural that their ability keep increasing—let alone the various tournaments held to test their game skills).

Although not written, the players are very obedience to the rules of the game. Control and supervision are done by themselves which will be followed up by the servers of the companies producing the games. They are not only committed to play in the same time and on the same arena, to play as best as they can, to win their teams but also to interact with other players—which is the interesting part of online games. It obviously illustrates how the aspect of “separation” by space and time does not hinder the players to be always bounded to the unwritten rules applied to themselves.

This fact shows how the social relation changes in terms of quality and quantity (Dijk, 2006) and is not merely built based on physical presence but also based on interest and shared needs. It becomes a critical point to make relations efficient without considering distance and time differences. However, the aspect of separation also brings other consequences. The high frequency and intensity of long-distance playing often trigger “space confusion” for many people (Sullivan, 2013). It is what then produces the reserved and individualistic attitude generally found in online-gamers which are always, from time to time, busy to think of the strategies to defeat their opponents.

It is true that online-game as a part of digital media offers the acceleration of access resulting in "participation" and intense "interaction" between the actors of the media industry and the audience, namely the users from all around the globe. The participation and interaction can obviously be seen in online games. The high level of participation and interaction of players originating from various nations will eventually influence the online game industry syndication, by the investment of local servers in potential countries.

As seen from how the rules of the games are enforced and from the illustration of organizational aspects above, the ability of digital media to bridge the folk culture creativity, originating from the egalitarian grassroots and the capitalist culture represented by online-game vendor companies, and eventually produce the unique convergent culture (Jenkins, 2006). Subsequently, it is reasonable to claim that the convergence of digital media provides a “hybrid world” (Bennet, Kendall, and McDougal, 2011), the world where myriads of cultures meet, yet each culture is still preserving their uniqueness and localities.

It is at least illustrated by the answers of the informants who do not consider the prize money important, but rather emphasize on the "levels" (level of the games) and
"prestige" that they are renowned as the great player either in the virtual or the real world. In the digital community, togetherness is an important matter. It is natural then that self-identity and self-concept of an individual is often not merely shaped by the real social agents surrounding one's self, but also by the affirmation and confirmation of the virtual community within which they socialize and the social relations they build (Bennet, Kendall, and McDougal, 2011; Castells, 2010).

Online-game which involves so many players is the realistic illustration of network society which is supported by technology which then "change" individuals' identity in one's social relations. Reflexivity and individualization (the ability to fastly change identity—illustrated by the figures which can be chosen by the players) are very much needed in the globalization era. The broad and various alternatives also force an individual to have the sensitivity for norms, cultures and possess a high level of tolerance for other players (Monge and Contract, 2003). The ability to acknowledge and reflect one's self is a very important matter, that one is not merely a private individual but is also affiliated to the organization or broad virtual community. Therefore whatever they do or say in online-games also belongs to the public.

Discussion

Tomlinson (in Steger, 2006) defines cultural globalization as the more increasing network of complex cultural interconnectivity and interdependency which becomes the character of modern social life. The global cultural stream is controlled by international media company which utilizes various new communication technology to shape society and identity. In the context of this study, the global cultural stream is controlled by international online-game servers which take benefits from the development of the virtual world and creates networks in online-game, namely Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG). This global cultural stream then produces an interesting phenomenon called cosmopolitan cultural identity. Previously, Robertson stated that the global cultural stream often evokes a form of local cultures which he termed "glocalization." For him, the glocalization will rather eliminate the cultural homogeneity.

Cosmopolitan cultural identity is interpreted as identity connected to cultural groups whose interactions are regulated by the universal principles applied globally regardless of national borders, religious values, organization, or certain age groups. According to the data, there are several universal principles applied in online-games which are internalized in the cultural identity of players and become the cosmopolitan cultural identity of online-gamers. Here are those cosmopolitan cultural principles:

1. Competitive Fighting Spirit; this principle appears on the satisfaction when winning, the strategy applied universally and played together with other players either in the same country or abroad, and the achievements got by the players.
2. Challenge Conquest: this principle appears on the form of the willing to face various level challenges either for the economic reason (prize money) or non-economic (affiliation motives or appreciation).

3. Global Organizational Participation; the principle appears in the form of strategy system learning, rank in a certain position, and rank achievement and rank. The players play in a game relying on teamwork and the players get an improvement of organizational work.

4. Excitement Popularity Pleasure Satisfaction; the principle appears when the players get global adulation or appreciation for their achievements in the world of online games.

5. Global Homogeneity; this principle appears when the players homogeneously form groups using the same language of instruction and bound by in-group feeling (clan) even though they are originated from different countries. In addition, they are also subject to the shared community rules. Therefore even though they come from different countries they form a homogenous culture.

The internalization process of this principles is obtained by the players of online games either individually or collectively. Individually, the players learn to achieve ranks and status in online-games based on individual skill. Meanwhile, the players learn to achieve global rank together with their groups. It means that each online-gamer has to possess cosmopolitan community applied either in individual or group levels.

Cultural and ethnic identity is marked by values and uniquenesses. Values are every evaluation extracted from cultural beliefs. For example, there are cultures which more emphasize communal than individual values and vice versa. The uniqueness is the feeling of a strong bond. In other words, the identity which appears is the identity based on the bigger groups and values produced by the interaction with the group. This cosmopolitan cultural identity takes part in building group's cohesivity and strong in-group feeling. The players are demanded to be loyal and have the strong commitment to the group. Therefore it is not impossible that in the real life the online-gamers also build identities which conforms to the identity they build in the virtual world. It surely helps them to form an individual identity which is easy to adapt globally since this cultural identity is applied on an international level.

However, due to the fact that these online games tend to adopt "war" context, there are various dangerous aspects. Most of the players have started online-gaming since elementary school, which means that they have been exposed to violent scenes for years. These violent scenes are, according to the logic of MMORPG online-games, important in order to win. It includes the use of weapons and aggressive acts such as dismantling, killing, and destroying. Moreover, those activities are not done to "dead" objects such as things or computer but to other characters which are also played by
other players who are "living human." The satisfaction when winning this aggressive, violent acts is, for us, rather alarming.

Therefore, based on the research result, we recommend that a community service titled The Literacy of Cosmopolitan Cultural Identity of MMORPG youth online-gamers, which can contribute considerations concerning this phenomenon.

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