Me and My Indonesianess:
How *Kaskusers* Express Their In-group Feelings

Widya Pujarama

Department of Communication Science, Universitas Brawijaya
Jl. Veteran, Malang 65141
Email: mncprwidya@ub.ac.id

Abstract: It is asserted that new cultural hub provided by communication technology in the 21st century has driven both collectivist and individualist societies to reshape their identities. This research examines how Kaskusers, who visited Kaskus Regional Melbourne Lounge Thread, construct their collective identity by composing their profile page. Applying Van Leeuwen's social semiotic theory, the study revealed Kaskusers were conducting self-disclosure by revealing their primary and situational identity, which mainly reflects their cultural connection to Indonesia. To conclude, Kaskus was perceived as a utopian community where the culture-bounded "idealised version [of self]" interacted in the egalitarian environment on online site.

Keywords: collective identity, online community, social semiotics

Abstrak: Teknologi komunikasi di abad ke-21 mendorong masyarakat, baik kolektivis maupun individualis, untuk membentuk kembali identitas mereka. Penelitian ini membahas bagaimana Kaskuser yang mengunjungi thread Kaskus Regional Melbourne Lounge menuliskan profil mereka. Berlandaskan semiotika sosial van Leeuwen, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa Kaskuser melakukan pengungkapan diri dengan menunjukkan identitas primer dan identitas situasional mereka yang mayoritas mencerminkan hubungan budaya mereka dengan Indonesia. Sebagai kesimpulan, Kaskus dianggap sebagai sebuah utopian community di mana "idealised version [of self]" berinteraksi di dunia maya yang egaliter.

Kata Kunci: identitas kolektif, komunitas online, semiotika sosial

National identity that rooted mainly on individuals' cultural expression has always been in a continuum. It is argued that online forum elaborates the way society connects among them regardless place of living worldwide. Either dispersed member of Indonesian society worldwide or local Indonesian abroad would find communicating with other Indonesians manageable. Therefore, it is claimed that globalisation supports society to enhance nation's cultural discourses.

Citing Rantanen (2005, p. 8) definition of globalization as: "a process in which worldwide economic, political, cultural, and social relations have become increasingly mediated across time and space", nationalism and local culture seems to be threatened. This paper contends that there are chances for individuals to negotiate their personal and collective identity, although Devereux (2007, p.51) argues that internet had been blamed as an agent of "homogenisation" that "allows

little room for either local resistance to or local appropriation and reinvention of globalised cultural products".

This research highlights the notion of "*glocalisation*" (Devereux 2007, p. 69) as it attempts to discuss how Indonesians shape their shared identity, which could be observed by analysing how *Kaskusers* construct themselves at profile page of Kaskus online community. The term "*glocalisation*" refers to the acculturation that takes place once the western (or the global) culture assimilates with the local (mostly of developing countries).

This paper describes how members of Kaskus online community (www.kaskus.us, now www.kaskus.go.id), not only are expressing global topics or discussions from local perspectives, *but* are also displaying their preferred identities. From Intercultural Communication perspectives, Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012, p. 9) asserts that cultural identity and perception of individuals' in group feeling as Indonesian are challenged during messages exchanged among internet users who join Kaskus online community. Kendall and Haythornthwaite's research on the internet and community (2010, p. 1083) found that despite significant interactions between the multiple geographical*,* both within online and between offline worlds, it is "surprisingly rooted in local action and activity". The finding supports the argument that "*cultural identity salience*" (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 79) of part of Indonesian remain strong regardless their place of living. Further, Arvind (1999) adds that nationality is the main source of its citizens' identity

constructions. Therefore, national identity which part of social identity will always carried by the member of society.

The interactions in online forums are mostly based on content-dimension of text. In other words, it focuses mostly to the information or knowledge exchange, rather than constructing closer relationship or intimacy towards one another, including self-disclosure of personality and attitude, which are principally expressed in *the user ID*. Van Leuween (2005, p. 139) coined Zablocki and Kanter argument that said people with small considerations of occupational and economic roles tend to experiment with their lifestyle. Kaskus as an online site stimulates this lifestyle experimentation that involves how *Kaskusers* arrange their collective identity. The term "my *Indonesianess*" refers to *Kaskusers'* attempt to construct values relating to their self-identification as *Indonesians*.

The covering law applicable to this study is social semiotics*,* which states that the meanings of any sign made via distinctive social interactions are derived from the semiotics of signs and the unique social aspects of that culture studied via ethnography (Vannini, 2007, p. 115-116). This helps a researcher to understand the Kaskus site's unique culture and experiences of its members, while structurally interpreting the signs that exist within that culture, especially how *Kaskusers* perform their lifestyle depiction experimentation which are written on their profile page.

With regards to globalisation, Devereux (2007, p. 44-69) proposes two stances: the political economic and pluralist perspectives. The first point of view argues that globalisation has become a new form of colonisation and has widened the gap between the information-rich and information-poor countries (p. 47), resulting in the domination of consumerism-oriented activities. This dystopian or pessimistic view of the internet believes that media globalisation also maintains the digital divide -of those who have access to the internet and those who do not. However, one must argue that in terms of the internet access today, the gap between the rich and poor countries and the rich and poor people within all countries has narrowed somewhat as the internet has become less expensive.

The second perspective -the pluralist view believes in '*glocalisation*' (Devereux, 2007, p. 69) where local audiences modify what the global culture offers, to fit their own realities. Despite the vast development of globalised online forums and communities, it has been argued that the content and background cultures remain localised (Devereux, 2007, p. 69; Kendall & Haythornthwaite 2010, p. 1084). Furthermore, the local culture affiliations would have also been observable by studying how internet users composing their online profile.

It is argued that online world creates an alternative identity for its users (Wood and Smith, 2005, p. 3) in the virtual world. However, Belanger (2009) argues that object, signifier or representament, and interpretant are inseparable in the meaning making process (p. 60), which makes internet users' real and virtual identity inseparable. Therefore, Belanger's research (2009) had provided a deep understanding of popular culture products as social capital. It is interesting to explore how internet users' perceived identity relates to this social capital.

In an academic essay about the currency of uses and gratification theory on the new media, Ruggiero (2000) argues that interactivity, demassification, and asynchroneity as their three main qualities should be addressed towards the evolvement of user-oriented content on the internet. To put it in other words, it could be stated that individuals prompt their "online connections" (Kozinets 2010, p. 13) to fulfil their sense-making needs.

A study by Pentecost (2011, p. 46) found that social media "offers a myriad opportunities for people all over the world to reconceptualise themselves as both individuals and communities". In *Imagined Communities in Cyberspace*, Pentecost (2011) had attempted to understand the interrelationships among diasporas, European-Indonesian descendants both within the Facebook group -*Dutch-Indonesian Discussion Group*, and *the Indo Project* website. The online community had helped reconnect lost family ties and provide individuals with shared experiences. The research asserted that the online community could be generated based on past connections of the participants, to Indonesia. In brief, the internet facilitates

individuals to conveniently prompt any communication process with others based on their preferences, either correlated with the present or the past. Consequently, the engagement with open dimensions of the self on different online communities has arguably allowed the construction of alternative identities.

Wood and Smith (2005, p. 52) define identity as "a complex personal and social construct, consisting in part, of who we think ourselves to be, how we wish others to perceive us, and how they actually perceive us". Identity in Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC) seems to be fluid and multidimensional, unlike the day-to-day static identity both as individuals and as part of larger society in the offline world. In other words, the lack of physical appearances online has resulted in members constructing their alternative identities based on own preferences. This seems to be one of the benefits of online communication. Moreover, Schiano (cited in Wood & Smith, 2005, p. 61) states "most people in online forums act as idealised versions of themselves (rather than markedly distinct individuals)". These alternative identities are also fluid as the signified self could be easily changed unlike the physical body in offline communication. In summary, the virtual community, in particular, has created "a [new] persona [from oneself]" (Shank & Cunningham, 1996, p. 39), in a new environment.

In general, communication practices within online communities tend to be playful and informal. Wong (2000, p. 183)

claimed that online cultures are dominated with *"cartoon cultures"*. This *cartoon culture* in a given society can be seen from the sources of emoticons available on a site. Wong further mentions that emoticons have their cultural dimensions that mirror society in general. The reflection of group membership therefore will be shown either explicitly or implicitly on internet users' profile, especially when they have strong cohesion with other members of the registered online community Kaskus. The statement from *Kaskusers' bio* column had been treated as semiotic resources.

"Within online communities, the "public" has largely been a blurred picture of anonymous individuals as the internet 'make[s] possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple". Scholars argue that anonymity enables users to explore their socially suppressed aspects of public selves or to take on multiple identities. However, studies on CMC also prove the consistency of online and offline selves among the majority of users" (Tian & Wu, 2007, p. 243)

The concept of semiotics involves "an act of interpretation" (Hansen, Cottle & Negrine, 1998, p. 131). This emerges when individuals' interpersonally practise sense making or according to their preferences, conduct further interpersonal communication within society. In other words, signs or signifiers become the embodiment of countless potential meanings (Shank & Cunningham, 1996, p. 33; Kress, 2010, p. 54). This research uses social semiotic theory that argues, signs, or better yet resources, work because people with specific interests and specific strategies produce signs to achieve their goals" (Vannini, 2007, p. 131). The term *"semiotic resources'* is used in social semiotic theory,

as it indicates the utilisation of signs by individuals.

Van Leeuwen (2005, p. 3) outlines semiotic resources as "the actions and social artefacts we use to communicate, whether they are produced physiologically … or by means of technologies ….". For example, the words and images on a website can be analysed as semiotic resources. In analysing website design of internet books, Papson, Goldman & Kersey (2007, p. 308) claimed that a book's layout and design were the most important elements to be focused on, for gauging users' best experiences within the site. The two elements are dominantly used "to convey both affect (emotions) and meaning" (Papson, Goldman & Kersey, 2007, p. 316).

On a website, text and image hold an equivalent position, as the interpretation of a sign is a "subjective experience" (Wood & Smith, 2005, p. 56). Therefore, the communication process is affected by participants' self-interests and motivations, and the use of limited semiotic resources available on the site (Kress, 2010, p. 35, p. 54). It appears to be limited as unlike broadcasting media, which are mostly scheduled and ubiquitous, a website domain requires individual motivations to be accessed. For instance, an online user will either type www.yahoo.com or click a specific hyperlink to visit the site. This semiotic resource on a site works as follows: "writing, names, and images, show-while colours, frame, and highlight, each to maximum effect and benefit" (Kress, 2010, p. 1).

This research sought an in-depth understanding of how *Indonesians* who join Kaskus online community and posted on *Regional Melbourne Lounge forum* proclaim their cultural connection to the country regardless their current geographic locations. Research question formulated during research process was: How do *Kaskusers* who posted on *Regional Melbourne Lounge forum* articulate their profile by utilising semiotic and other essential cultural resources?

METHODS

This research relies on the interpretivist paradigm which "is generally qualitative in nature and examines the communicative actions of a group or setting to understand the rules applicable to them" (Weerakkody, 2009, p. 29). This unique culture becomes the main site where people construct their own identities based on the interaction with overlapping shared-meanings within their society (LeCompte & Schenshul, 1999, p. 49).

This study uses constructionism as its epistemology because it focuses on the negotiation or active interpretation and reproduction of the technological-based semiotic resources available to users on the Kaskus online site. For instance, how an online browser makes a decision to generate an alternate online identity other than their self-representation in the offline world. This supports the constructionist point of view, which emphasizes that meaning is created through the experiences and consciousness of and within individual interactions with the world (Weerakkody, 2009, p. 10).

This research also employed a social semiotic analysis of data, which collected

via unobtrusive observation of the site. Data or semiotic resources examined in this research are mainly retrieved from Kaskus *Regional Melbourne Lounge Thread* and as many as 622 *Kaskusers' Profile* page, where words and images are available to be analysed. Hutchinson (2002, p. 84) argued that online participant observation provides convenience by allowing the researcher to flexibly and asynchronously collect data form websites. The observation method used was the 'naturalistic observation technique' (Hutchinson, 2002, p. 87), which allowed for 'naturalistic' and unobtrusive data collection, which preserved the richness of the data and protected it from researcher interference or reactivity. This method of data collection was carried out in two distinct periods of August-September 2011 and of September to November 2015.

FINDING

The term Kaskus used throughout this document refers to the Kaskus online community (www.kaskus.id) especially Kaskus *Forum Regional Melbourne.* Greater forum of Kaskus was founded by three Indonesian students in Seattle, USA on 6 November 1999 to accomplish a class assignment in an IT-related university course (Kaskus, 2009) that has been utilised to date by *Indonesian* worldwide to keep themselves updated on Indonesian current affairs and stay in touch with other Indonesians. Remarkably, a significant number of Indonesians -both locally-based and residing outside the Indonesian archipelago then joined and interacted within the site, which then became the virtually "*Largest Indonesian Community*" (Kaskus homepage, 2011).

Kaskus as an online community provides a range of social semiotic sources for Indonesians to communicate with each other regardless of their physical location. The online community provides an Indonesian perspective of both Indonesian and worldwide current affairs from the Kaskus community's perspectives in its forums and allows room of discussion, either as criticism or in support of the topics and issues discussed.

This paper identifies a specific forum: "[The Lounge] *Melbourne yg baru*" as a line of conversation, even though it has been started since 2005 to 2015. Emphasizing Ruggiero's asynchroneity (2000, p. 16) that encourages a sense of active participation regardless of their personal time constraints, this paper identify a specific forum: "[The Lounge] Melbourne yg baru" as a communication artefact of online community, even though it has been started since 2005 to 2015.

This research explores how *Kaskusers* express their collective identity as *Indonesian* whilst consistently tried to be anonymous in an online forum. Data collected were qualitatively analysed using van Leuween's Social Semiotic approach. During the data collection phase, it is found that Kaskus *Regional Melbourne Lounge* that had been observed was leading 617 *Kaskusers* to take part into some random conversations from 2005 until recently. Kaskus has persuades their member to update their *profile* page by filling the *bio* column (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Screen Capture of Aremalang's Profile Page

Accompanying ID Picture, on *Kaskuser's* individual *Profile* page, user would find the chosen name of *Kaskuser.* Most of the *Kaskusers* use anonymous name, which they created as an ID. As seen on Figure 1, Aremalang is a premium member of Kaskus that called *KASKUS Plus*. This research focuses mostly on *Bio* column where *Kaskusers* could opt to use Kaskus's default "*Agan ini masih malu-malu nyeritain tentang dirinya*" statement, or to compose new words as a form of expressing self.

Although the *Bio* default information appears to be persuading *Kaskusers* to use the existing *Bio*, which in simple English said this person is shy to describe him/herself, it is found that 49.35% from total 622 *Kaskusers* who posted on Kaskus *Regional Melbourne Lounge* remain unchanged. Furthermore, 99.34% carry on being anonymous, by: (a) Keeping the *Bio* default information, posting either meaningless words, showing objection to write down personal information, stressing *ingroup feeling* towards Kaskus, promoting their products or website, or saying hello, and; (b) Connecting self with a cultural value or information which closely related to one's *primary* and *situational* identity.

It has been established that *Kaskusers* variously reveal personal details, which are related to their social identities. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012, p. 77) describe that social identity "consist of cultural or ethnic membership identity, gender identity, sexual orientation identity, age identity, disability identity, and professional identity". These group memberships are not exclusive, because individuals are able to relate themselves to more than one culture. Despite main ethnic or cultural identity has been well established; individuals might also develop their second cultural identity. The negotiation between main culture and co-culture is called symbolic identity, which has always been personal (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012) and ever-changing.

Research by those such as Belangers (2009) found that users' values indicated online were parallel to the users' culture. Online browsers could be perceived as 'imagined communities' that reflect offline communities or societies. Thus, online communication seems to strengthen social cohesion within the cultures concerned. Unlike newspapers and television programs that move people to be together synchronously and in silence,

the internet facilitates asynchronous communication with a sense of togetherness. For instance, *Kaskusers* are able to generate new threads of a discussion or comment on a topic at their own convenience, regardless of when and how long they spend time within the online community. Moreover, the existing bulletin board system makes archival topics available for future access. This has undoubtedly promoted the Kaskus site as a popular information source for Indonesians who read and write in the Indonesian language.

DISCUSSION

The Community of Common Interests: Kaskus and Fragmented Individuals

It is suggested that *Kaskusers* perceived the online interactions to be equal to offline relationships (Hutchinson, 2002; Purcell, 2005; Wong, 2000). In other words, *Kaskusers* became individuals who interactively personalised their information selections (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 13). Words and pictures on the site worked as semiotic resources, which narrowed *Kaskusers*' information retrievals into specific themes. The site also persistently separated the discussion threads and advertisements to lead *Kaskusers* towards the active involvement with the online community.

One of the semiotic resources available on the Kaskus site was the 'politics of naming' (in their IDs) practiced by individuals. Kaskus suggests its member to generate pseudonyms using up to a maximum 15 characters using a creative combination of the 27 letters in the alphabet and dot (.). The online interviews revealed that the Kaskus IDs represented the

Kaskusers personalised selves. It seems that the online identity was equally important as the offline one. Further, it might even be more important than their offline identity, as they could create it themselves according to their own wishes. This supports the argument that online identities are based on individual's idealised portrayals of the self (Schiano in Wood & Smith, 2005, p. 61). Not only constructing their names, *Kaskusers* also managing their self-disclosures, which remained consistent with individuals' connection to their primary culture.

The association with Indonesian culture seems to strengthen the self, which presented by *Kaskusers*. By experiencing with *Bio* column, *Kaskusers* made the online forum synonymous with social media where members strengthened both their individual and collective identities in convenient ways (Pentecost, 2010, p. 46). This suggests that the Indonesians practise their online involvements on the Kaskus website as part of their gatherings within an imagined community.

Kaskusers are Anonymously Expressing Their In-group Feeling as Indo-Melbournians

CMC mostly based on verbal language, the information given will always be occurred within an embedded societal system. In other words, interaction within an online community takes place in a specific cultural context. On a website, text and image hold an equivalent position, as the interpretation of a sign is a "subjective experience" (Wood & Smith, 2005, p. 56). Therefore, the communication process is affected by participants' self-interests and motivations, and the use of limited semiotic

resources available on the site (Kress, 2010, p. 35, p. 54).

As discussed earlier, Van Leeuwen (2005, p. 3) points out that technology persuades internet user to utilise symbols to create their alternate self from available social artefacts. *Bio* column on *Kaskusers' Profile* page persuades *Kaskusers* to rethink and decide which information should be appeared on their personal information space. Data showed that *Kaskusers* who edited their *Bio* column mostly informally write in English, Bahasa Indonesia, and also mix-language.

Belanger's work (2009, p. 60) was based on Umberto Eco's semiotic theory, which argues that object, signifier or *representament,* and *interpretant* are inseparable in the meaning making process. The use of English and Indonesian language serves as a semiotic resource, which reflects *Kaskusers'* group membership to either Australian or Indonesian culture.

It has been identified that *Kaskusers* variously reveal personal details, which are related to their main culture or second culture group membership. These connections to social identity (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2012, p. 77) have been expressed by *Kaskusers on Regional Melbourne Lounge Thread* by revealing their cultural identity, gender and also professional identity. These group memberships are not exclusive, because individuals are able to relate themselves to more than one culture.

Despite main ethnic or cultural identity is well established; individuals might also develop their second culture.
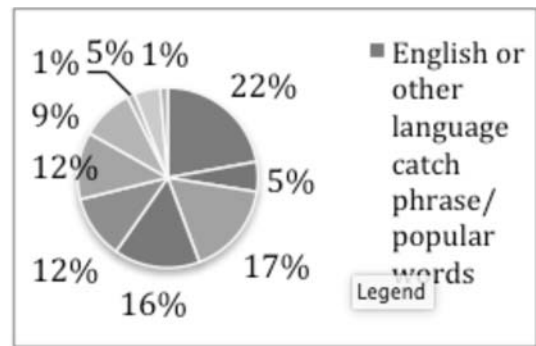

Figure 2 *Kaskusers'* **Personal Details, which are Revealing Their Group Membership**
Source: Research data

Ting-Toomey (2012) argues that the negotiation between main culture and co-culture is called symbolic identity, which is always been personal. These individual choices could be seen on Figure 2 above. Although 99.34% *Kaskusers* who visited *Melbourne Regional Forum Lounge Thread* mostly opted to be anonymous, they were still unveil their job, connecting their selves with a cultural value such as wise words, catch phrases, humbled themselves, and place of origin or where they reside. *Kaskusers* has also opted to disclose their sex, their interest, religion, and perceived personality.

The profile information given by *Kaskusers* reveals their group membership, either as part of Indonesians society or Australian residents. However, it could be derived from the data that *Kaskusers* who posted on *Regional Melbourne Lounge Thread* has indirectly preserved their inherited collectivist culture. For example, *Kaskusers* wrote popular words, wise words, and catch phrases either in English or Indonesian to proclaim their collective worldview. This is consistent with Van

Leeuwen's (2005) argument that semiotic resources have been used to strengthen their emotional connection as Indonesians.

It is therefore claimed that *Kaskusers* as a speech community have developed their cultural connection to both their national culture and foreign cultures. This maintains Devereux's (2007, p. 69) argument on *glocalisation*, which believes that local individuals are constructing their realities by modifying what has been offered by the global cultures. Not only has strongly been connected to their main cultural identity, *Kaskusers* are also consulting their everyday life abroad from Indonesian perspective such as by using Indonesian informal language. Therefore, the local culture affiliations as Indonesian are carried along the conversations and self-representations that have happened.

Pentecost (2011, p. 46) argues that social media "offers a myriad opportunities for people all over the world to reconceptualise themselves as both individuals and communities". In Kaskus as an online forum, identity remains to be fluid and multidimensional (Wood & Smith, 2005). Anonymity has still become apparent (Baym, in Tian & Wu, 2007) regarding how *Kaskusers* compose their *Bio* column. Data showed how *Kaskusers* opted to be anonymous by disclosing only work affiliations, interests and hobbies, or their products in an informal and playful way. However, at the same time, this cartoon culture (Wong, 2000) is revealing how individuals secure their cultural membership as Indonesians because it reflects their cultural dimensions.

In addition, *Kaskusers* also express humbleness on their *Bio* column, both in Indonesian and in English. *Kaskusers* were mostly confirming their *social* style (van Leuween, 2005) as Indonesian. To sum up, maintaining private-self guardedness and connectedness among *Kaskusers* are practiced despite their individual choices in shaping their online identities via semiotic resources available for them. The nation, hereby, Indonesia, has still became "the chief source of identity for individuals" (Arvind, 1999) to interact with other individuals online.

CONCLUSION

This research sought understanding how Indonesian use the semiotic resources available on Kaskus online community, focusing on those who had posted on *Regional Melbourne Lounge Thread*, to construct their online identities. It had become apparent that *Kaskusers* maintain their collective values as Indonesian while pursuing individual needs online.

Kaskusers were still conducting self-disclosure by revealing their *primary and situational* identity, which mainly reflects their cultural connection to Indonesia. In conclusion Kaskus was perceived as a utopian community where the culture-bounded idealised version of self interacted in the egalitarian environment on online site.

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