YOUTH PERSONHOOD @CROSSROAD:
A Virtual Ethnography of An Asymmetrical Relation Between Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants in Indonesia

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ABSTRAK


Kata Kunci: Anak muda, Personhood, Digital Natives, Internet, Etnografi Virtual

ABSTRACT

Indonesian youth has developed into the largest internet user in this country. The development of technology drives the digital natives toward new challenges in identity attainment (personhood). It is common for young people to have a “storm and stress” phase in their life which is part of their identity attainment as one of the major and basic tasks of youth daily life. However, along with youth behavior in using internet, a generational problem emerges. The problematic behavior pattern includes taking dangerous selfies, sexting, cyberbullying, and promoting the radical activism. Through a research conducted with online observation and virtual ethnography, we reveal that these concerning phenomena occur due to asymmetric relation between youth (digital natives) and their predecessors (digital immigrants) during identity shaping process. Youth nowadays stand between two forms of knowledge which are different from each other: on one side, the virtual knowledge system that does not know the boundary of time and space, and on the other side is the knowledge that is enculturated through the family institution which tends to be more exclusive and traditional. Young people are in a complex situation when their parents, or the generation before them, face difficulty in adapting to technological advancement. Such condition is problematic since virtual interaction become an essential reference for the digital natives in shaping their personhood.

Keywords: Youth, Personhood, Digital Natives, Internet, Virtual Ethnography
Youth, Digital Natives, and Technology Development: An introduction

As the most active user of internet (Buzzcity, 2015; Balia, 2016), youth activities in such media seems problematic. In 2014, the Indonesia government blocked websites that were promoting extreme ideology to prevent youth involvement in cyber radicalism. However, even after more than 1000 accounts related to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), for instance, were banned, their propaganda reached more than a million users. Meanwhile, several cases of youth died after taking dangerous selfies, cyberbullying, and pornographic involvement also committed by this young generation on the internet. Based on these phenomena, in this paper, we would like to answer how and why youth conduct such actions?

In this paper, we are not intending to promote what Ito et al. (2008) call as “internet determinism” in youth behavior phenomena. It seems to us that in such a point of view, youth comprehended as a passive entity and undermine their capacity to engage actively with technology—hence, scientifically unproductive. We intend to response Ahn (2011) invitations to work on empirical studies, to uncloak the effects of digital environments on youth outcomes. We argue that youth behavior in digital technology is deeply influenced by an asymmetrical relation between digital natives and digital immigrant. The huge discrepancies between youth and their predecessor regarding internet and social media shape the process of youth identity attainment. Such asymmetrical relation enables youth to use the internet as a primary source of reflection about their personhood because they think that predecessors’ guidelines no longer useful and worth their attention (Prensky, 2001).

Many people nowadays are influenced by the internet. People of all ages use it to find information and entertainment, but youth, as an age group, utilize the internet the most. Youth as is defined by World Health Organization (2014) as a person whose age is 15-24 years old. However, in the context of Indonesia, Sarlito (2008) defines youth as a person between 11 and 24 years old and not married; 24 is the maximal limit if the person still needs parental supports for daily life. A person of any age who is married is considered an adult by law and religious systems in Indonesia. Regarding the internet, youth mostly use social media and networking platform such as Facebook, Twitter, Path, WhatsApp and other applications. They have a close attachment to technology, gadgets, and the internet; logged on those applications for 24 hours a day. That is why they are called digital natives.

To be precise, digital natives are youth born into the digital age (after 1980) who have access to networked digital technologies and strong computer skills and knowledge. Digital natives share a common global culture that is defined not strictly by age but by certain attributes and experiences related to how they interact with information technologies, information itself, one another, and other people and institutions (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008). Furthermore, Prensky (2001) defines digital natives as those who understand digital languages or “native speakers.” Digital natives are the generation born in the digital era and spend most of their time in computerized life, using video games, digital music players, video cams, cell phones and other digital devices. Digital natives live in a digital environment and attach to such technologies as a part of their life. In contrast, those who called digital immigrants are people born before digital era and adopting, to some extent, the new technologies.

Internet development also changes informational and communications technology. The shape of interaction has been shifting from “one-to-one” into “one-to-many” and then “many-to-many”. Regarding that connection, social media is the most common in “many-to-many” communication. Social media itself is

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1 In this paper, we interpret dangerous selfies as a tendency to take self-picture in the presence of risks— injury, or even death. Other author defines such actions as “killfies”. For more detail see Lamba et al., 2016.

2 World Health Organization (WHO) adopts the concept of youth from the United Nation (UN). The term often used interchangeably with young people (10-24 years old) and adolescence (10-19 years old).
difficult to define, but for the purposes of this paper we describe social media as any website or software that allows people to receive and disseminate information interactively, including websites that allow people to read social updates or articles and moments later being able to respond with a text update, post a video, or stream audio. In some studies, social media is categorized as “social networking site” (Miller, 2012; Postill, 2012; Horst, 2012; Boyd, 2008; Stern, 2008). These are varieties or different platforms of both that equip users with the ability to share information in “one-to-one,” “one-to-many,” and also “many-to-many” virtual interaction. According to Miller (2012), the presence of this these media/sites is particularly significant in contemporary anthropology because they have an extraordinary ability to return the world to certain kinds of intense and interwoven forms of social interactions.

Indonesia is one of the most active social media users. In June 2010, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology reported that the number of Indonesian internet users reached 45 million, or approximately 18.5% of the total population, growing 50% from 30 million from the previous year (2009). This growth is even more dramatic because ten years earlier, in 1999, it was only 0.26% of the total population use the internet. In January 2016, there are 79 million active social media users in Indonesia (Balea, 2016). Among these statistics, mobile device users in Indonesia are mostly under the age of 25 as stated by Buzzcity its 2015 report.

Figure 1. Social Media Use in Indonesia
Source: Balea (2016)

Figure 2. Age Range of Internet Users in Indonesia
Source: Buzzcity, 2015
Youth as digital natives capitalize their superiority in the online world for multiple purposes. They have a tendency to put their entire experience on the internet, especially on social media. It is common to see youth disclose their personal chats, private photos, or their political thoughts on social media (Ahn, 2011). However, their attachment to this online medium has escalated into more serious matters as youth starts to enjoy taking dangerous selfies, sexting, pornography, hate speech, bullying, and other risky activities. Some even use the internet to promote radicalism. Such phenomena trigger our curiosity to explain why and how youth engage in such actions.

Methodology in Pursuing Online Phenomena

Postill and Pink (2012) state that there are two common methods used to study social media, content analysis of (1) microblogging and other social media sites and (2) social network analysis. Besides online-based research, some scientists expand their method to offline interactions (traditional ethnography) to meet their enquiry (see Postill and Pink, 2012; Wilson, 2006). However, in this study, we pursue the information by exclusively analyzing microblogging and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Path.

We treat the internet as a culture of its own—as suggested by Hine (2000)—and social media sites as an ethnographic research plane. For our inquiries, we deliberately approaching this online phenomenon with two methods: (1) online observation, and (2) virtual ethnography. Online observation in this research means we conduct online investigations through some platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, group chat, online forum, and search engines like Yahoo! and Google. We use hashtags such as #florencje, #isisindonesia, #hestisundari, #selfiemerapi, and other hashtags to discover popular phenomena on the local internet. If some phenomena are happening, we look further to search if the content goes viral. Viral in this context means a content appears to spread and mutate via distributed networks in ways that the original producers cannot determine and control (Burgess, 2008).

Along with the observation, we conducted virtual ethnography through WhatsApp, Line, and other medias—basically the same platforms we used in online observation but with intense relation to informants. We collect, select, and analyze multiple chat logs we received from our informants. This method is commonly practiced by social scientists when dealing with virtual and digital research since chat logs contain a broad range of intermingled ethnographic data (Boellstorff et al, 2012; Pink et al, 2016). In addition, we use screenshots to illustrate the interface of virtual reality we are learning (Boellstorff et al, 2012). Furthermore, we observe local forum krucil.com and semprot.com to get the idea of its environment.

The ethnography of the internet, indeed, does not necessarily involve physical travel. Visiting the internet focuses on experiential rather than physical displacement. In this kind of research, we rehearse the ethnography method by looking, by reading, by imaging, and imagining (Hine, 2000). We have involved in twelve (12) personal chat conversations and three (3) virtual focus group discussions in different chat groups. We also observed more than ten (10) trending topics and two (2) virtual web-based forums.

Digital Natives @Crossroad: Case by case

Technological devices use in everyday life, to some extent, influences young people’s mind, behaviors, and lifestyle. Youth then share more information about themselves on social media sites than they did in the past (Madden et al.,

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3 One example of this methodology can be seen in Sindhunata (2013) “Dakwah 2.0: Perang Ideologi antara publik #IndonesiaTanpaJIL dan publik Jaringan Islam Liberal di Twitter.”

4 These two forums are widely known as virtual room to talk, share, and discuss mostly about sex-related contents. For more detail please see Febrian et al., 2013.
The internet offers various alternatives to channel their emotions, curiosities, and even aspired dreams. On the way to fill their needs, youth tend to show their self on social media and internet excessively. Stern (2008) explains “one of the main reasons young people concern themselves so much with authenticity in their self-presentations on their personal sites is because, ultimately, they seek social validation from their audience.” From our online observation, such an attachment of youth to technology could lead them to unfavorable states that we illustrate in four cases from Indonesia: (1) dangerous selfies; (2) sexting; (3) cyberbullying; and (4) radical activism.

Case 1. Digital natives and dangerous selfies

One of the most common uses of social media by youth is selfies. Youth try to impress their friends by taking selfies in their best appearances. Moreover, they also take pictures of themselves with some celebrities, famous politicians, or other public figures. It is also common to brag about themselves by taking selfies in some fancy places. They use selfies as a part of “imaging” themselves; giving information about their social class, hobbies, or what they are able to do. Youth post their selfies on their social media accounts and hope a “feedback” from their social circles—or in Wendt (2014) terms, “likes” as compliments. Users’ selfies become gifts to their networks and also provide them with personal validation.

Such a personal validation—as a goal of taking selfies—lead them to expand their actions to a more extreme level. Selfies are considered a form of self-exploration and provide a way of participating and affiliating with peers (Sifferlin, 2013). They tend to do something unique that nobody ever has done before. This kind of intention of self-expression is part of driving force that leads them to take selfies in a dangerous situation (Lamba, 2016).

Our findings show that the reason for youth’s tendency to take the dangerous selfies is because they are looking for a certain feeling of acknowledgment. To frame the moment will be a once-in-a-lifetime experience for youth and it will be regarded as achievement among friends.

“If there is a chance, you have to do it because the experience and the scenery we get at that time. Maybe we cannot get another chance; considering the time and price to pay (giggling). “Yes, of course. I want to do it. To experience it and make people jealous.”“I know it is cool to show off. if I can do that, it does look good in the picture.”

—(Interview with informant F)

In Indonesia, the dangerous selfies already have casualties. For example, there are some cases when youth taking selfies on the top of a mountain, while there is a high tidal wave or other dangerous circumstances; those acts ended up in death. In 2015, there were five cases where youth taking dangerous selfies and became victims of their own actions. They are Yunanto (21 years old) who fell into Merapi’s crater; Devi Mihfaudin (20) who dragged by tidal wave; Reza Ardiansyah (17) and Syarif Hidayat (16) who dropped into a waterfall; Rina Andriana, Rini Andriani, and Rina Ristiani (16) drowned in a lake; and Susiana (20) who also dragged by tidal wave. All of the victims were youth and their selfies already spread through their social media accounts before they passed away. The occurrence of dangerous selfies continued in 2016 when at least seven relatively similar cases reported throughout the year.

Case 2. Digital natives and sexting

Besides the dangerous selfies that can lead youth to death, there is another concerning issue of selfie that often done by youth: sexting. The act of sexting in youth mostly defined as a practice of taking, sending, and receiving sexually explicit materials—pictures, sounds, and text—of themselves through digital instruments (Febrian, et al., 2013). In the last few years, sexting

5 http://palingseru.com/62902/5-foto-selfie-menant-ang-bahaya-berujung-maut
phenomena increased significantly, especially in youth. In a survey titled “Sex and Tech,”7 The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (2008) reveals that 38% of youth ever had sexting activity.

Sexting is a new phenomenon that occurs after smartphone was invented. The wireless devices that support personal messenger (Blackberry Messenger/BBM, WhatsApp, and other chat applications) can be used as media for sexting. Sexting should be put in a bigger context of texting. Horst and Miller (2006) states that one of the most positive responses (in using texting) was that of young women who claimed that they could express themselves through text messages in a way they could not do with voice, implying that they were too shy to say these more intimate or poetic and romantic communications in person or over the phone.

Furthermore, in their research, Horst and Miller (2006) show that in some cases, someone possibly receives a text message with sexual encounter or flirtation while texting. However, the sending of sexually explicit photos has become an “everyday occurrence” among teens and children through social media, partially because school officials and parents are not able to tackle the issue (Sifferlin, 2013).

Our findings indicate that mobile devices already been used by youth for sexting. It is one way to overcome their verbal boundaries, either its social or psychological, to have conversations with their crush—mainly to tease them. Selfie, as content in sexting, play a significant part. The subject may use it as a flirting act, that can sexually stimulate their partner (a foreplay) or as a “main course”.

“As a part of the content, we can start by flirting, sending photos first or even a video, a short one. Or maybe when we reach the climax then I start recording the video…then I send it.”
—Informant M, interview

Social media messaging applications provide a secrecy for what they do while sexting. They can keep the sexual pictures, texts, sounds, or video for themselves. Youth do that either by saving the content via screen capture, downloading the media, or even “end-chat” (erasing the chat history) to leave nothing to trace. The mobile devices with their portable and mobile capability make them able to do sexting in private places, such as their own bedroom or toilet (Febrian, et al., 2013). Their high-tech gadgets also make them feel secure because they are able to manage their “real” identity. Youth could use other’s identities while doing sexting. As a private belonging, the device also provides a safe space from their parents.

“It is easier using smartphones, it is more personal. So, I can share photos and videos easily. Of course, I am afraid of getting caught, but I can always do it in my bedroom or toilet. As long as I do not make noises I feel safe. I can always end the chat and erase the content.”
—Informant I, interview

The sexting phenomena are not about moral standings. We intend to show the consequences of such actions could put the young people in vulnerable position. Such action could drive youth to public shaming, persecution, or sextortion.8 This could happen because photographs, as the main form of sexting, are no longer just tangible items; they are computer byte that easily spread across the internet (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008). In some cases, the sexting materials have spread to public. The society considered it as a disgrace then blame youth, thus, affect their social life almost instantly.9 This is one of the big consequences of youth’s action in placing information into digital formats that easily accessed by anyone, including people who they do not know (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008: 30).

8 Wolak and Finkelhor (2016) define sextortion as “…threats to expose a sexual image in order to make a person do something or for other reasons, such as revenge or humiliation.”
9 https://gaya.tempo.co/read/660893/heboh-sexting-remaja-orang-tua-harus-kontrol-diri
Case 3. Digital natives and cyberbullying

Another risk that can be comprehended as an effect of selfies is cyberbullying. Willard (2007) describes cyberbullying as “…being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the internet or other digital technologies.” Cyberbullying is significant because youth involves actively in such act; both as the victim and the bully.

Most popular cyberbullying in Indonesia that invoked by selfies, perhaps, is the case of Ida Tri Susanti when she posted on Facebook some photos of her and endangered cats. In her post, she wrote that those animals would be served as her lunch.10 Indonesian people were angry and accused her as an immoral person. Some of them also created a petition to provoke an action to treat her as a suspect of animal abuse. The petition went viral and later the local police gave her a trial. She closed her Facebook account ever since because she had been bullied by other internet users.11

Besides selfies, writing a status in social media could also provoke cyberbullying acts. For example, people bullied Florence Sihombing after she posts her feeling about the city she lives in, Yogyakarta, on Path.12 By using #florencje and #UsirFlorenceDariJogja hashtag, she became a trending topic on Twitter that time. In this case, local police also gave the suspect a trial. Florence got sentenced to six years in jail and IDR 1 billion fines.13 She also gets punished by Ethical Committee from Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM)—the university where she is studying.14

Later, Florence apologizes to the public for her post.

Case 4. Digital native and radical activism

The radical activism is one of the latest issues of youth and technology in Indonesia. One popular example is the involvement of several Indonesian citizens in ISIS recruitment. They are mostly targeting the young people who are deeply attached to the digital world. Online messages shared and through such a mechanism, social bonding between young people is formed. Thus, there is no surprise that the internet is playing a pivotal role in the radicalization of youth (RCMP-GME, 2011).

For many people, the internet serves as an ideal resource to connect a broader range of individuals in general and those who share similar interests, in particular, on the other side of the world. The internet enables people to connect and form relationships that would not happen in other kinds of interactions (Buckingham, 2008; Weber and Mitchell, 2008). In the process of virtual interaction, there is a chance that youth...
get brainwashed by the opinion leader on the internet to form a radicalism-based community. Current social media like Facebook provide a service, such as a fan page or group page, that enables each user to join any group they think can accommodate their needs and interest. From group pages, the discourses circulated among the members. Any member of the group can share those messages on their own accounts.

Radical Islam is one of the content youth often exposed through their social media. Youth inabilities to filter internet contents could lead them to consume radical doctrines. One example from our observation shows that the modification of one video game cover (Call of Duty: Black Ops) edited into “Call of Jihad” poster.**15** Surprisingly, there is also exist a Facebook page for “Call of Jihad”.

Figure 4. “Call of Jihad” Poster
Source: daullahislamiyyah.com**17**

The four cases provided above represent the relation of digital natives’ problems in pursuing identity and the development of technology and the open access. Youth indeed always have a storm and stress phase in their life and it is part of the identity attainment (Hasmi, 2013; Buckingham, 2008; Weber and Mitchell, 2008).**18** Nevertheless, youth nowadays stands between two forms of knowledge which are different from each other: on one side, the virtual knowledge system that does not know the boundary of time and space, and on the other side is the knowledge that is enculturated through the family institution which tends to be more exclusive and traditional. Young people are in a complex situation when their parents, or the generation before them, face difficulty in adapting to technological advancement (Houck et al., 2014). Such condition is problematic since the virtual interactions become an essential reference for the digital native in shaping their personhood.

**Personhood: What does it mean to be human?**

“[T]he avenue to understanding the nature of the self is not through the individual or the contents of her mental states, i.e. beliefs, feelings, intentions, but rather through social collaborations or structural couplings in the social environment. Each person is dependent on the others; their survival cannot be separated from their relationship with others, and in turn, the relationship depends on the mutual coordination of action among social actors.”

—Foley (1997)

Our main concern in this chapter lingers around the process of identity attainment within society. Identity processes, or identity-in-action in Weber and Mitchell (2008) term, are supposedly complex and in flux; incorporating old and new images of society. We argue that youth personhood nowadays no longer depends on the society—which shaped by predecessors’ knowledge. Rather, youth identity attainment in present context deeply influenced by the new reference: the internet. This mechanism is important to understand the nature of self-being processes in youth, especially in the era of advanced technologies.

As inferred from Foley (1997), to understand the self-being—of youth in this context—means we need to comprehend the society in the first


**17** The website is no longer active. We predict this page cannot be found due to government ban.

**18** This phase is important as one of the main task of youth. For details see Purwadi (2014).
place. Individual selfhood is indeed a social process in which individual and the social are indistinguishably related (Buckingham, 2012). In that sense, Berger (1973) states that society is a product of human nature, it is created in order for us to survive. Society created by the common acceptance of idea which in turn shape the reality that we perceive. Furthermore, Geertz (1973) explains that human beings—or to be precise, human thought—is social in all aspect: our conception of our surroundings is purely a product of social construction.

Based on this conception, youth, to be a human, need to follow a set of rules—the common acceptance of idea—that has been established within a society (Boyd, 2008). It is in a society, Berger (1973) argues, a human could properly function as a human being; the individual becomes a person. In other words, to be what we call human depends merely on an acknowledgment of our being by the society. Buckingham (2008) adds “...individuals may make claims about their identity but those claims need to be recognized by others. In seeking to define their identity, people attempt to assert their individuality, but also to join with others.” If one deliberately disobeys that set of guidelines, he or she would not be acknowledged, which means he or she would not be considered to be part of the society. Those who violate the rules that have been set will be punished accordingly, or in the worst case, there is even a possibility to be excluded from a certain society.

However, it is important to highlight that, according to Geertz (1973), common acceptance of the idea in the society highly determined by predecessors. Thus, the present generations, youth, are expected to behave accordingly to predecessors’ value and norms as the source. Predecessors are the main source of knowledge in the society. However, due to recent advancements in technology, the main sources of knowledge in society no longer come only from the predecessors, or in this paper, the digital immigrants. Thus, even though the society determines how to be human, the young generation nowadays can find its own way guidance through the latest digital instruments. This is the part when youth determine where they want to be situated within the social world (Boyd, 2008). In our interviews, we asked about youth experience in order to understand how they construct their self-definition.

Authors: “Some people say that youth, most of them are looking for identity through social media because their parents do not really sensitive or not really cool for them to share their thought. How about you?”
Informant LF: “Yes, that is true. Most of us, youth, if got upset or something with our parents, habitually we go to the social media. Social media is an escape, especially if you are connected with your friends; you will be an anti-social person when you hold your mobile phone.”

Because of the advancements in technology, youth no longer depend on the preceding society—their parents. The knowledge, which previously was limited, now has expanded through global networks. Social interactions through various social media platforms enable youth to virtually interact socially with another person on the other side of the world. Thus, it is possible for them to share or exchange diverse forms of knowledge.

The concept of how society works has been changed and no longer understandable within a certain community. Nevertheless, the idea that the successor, or youth, could get a grasp on certain forms of knowledge is doubtfully accepted by the predecessors. As Geertz (1973) mentions the act or the accomplishment of the successors cannot give an impact to the predecessors. Hence, it becomes problematic that youth and their parents have their own ideas of what a person is.

Authors: “Do you and your parents get along on social media?”
Informant: “Not really, hahaha. My parents do not have any social media”
Authors: “But what if they were in social media? Is it going to be fun for you?”
Informant: “Nope, personally I do not think that is a good idea since my parents are a little bit strict. They will comment all of my activity in social media while they already have done in my real life and I do
not need that [comments] anymore in social media. My parents do not know the idea of privacy, so if I become friend with them in the social media is not a good situation for me, there will be no private space left for me anymore.”
—informant A, chat group discussion

That kind of response is typical in our interviews. Youth rejects the idea of parents’ participation in social media activities. Social media function, which allows her to express herself unimpeded, would be compromised if her parents were involved. According to the informant, the older generation does not equally value such a freedom of expression. Such differences indicate that the presence of social media and internet have reshaped the interaction between generations.

**Asymmetrical Relation Between Digital Native and Digital Immigrant**

For the digital natives, new digital technologies are primary mediators of human-to-human connection (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008). The digital divide between native and immigrant is perceived by the digital natives as an escape from their parents’ supervision. While the digital immigrant value privacy and limits self-disclosure to a small circle of friends, the digital natives put personal information on social networking sites as completely as they can and they may have hundreds or even thousands of friends who can respond to it.

“I think most of us, youth, when we disagree or get angry with parents, we run away to social media. Some even use it more than it should: [they talk about] their family problem there [on social media]. I do not know what the motivation is, but it is common, maybe to get attention or just wreaking their madness.”
—Informant C, interview

“Social media is an escape route. There, we connect with our friends; we can really forget the real-life problem when we use the smartphone.”
—Informant NN, chat group discussion

Obviously, the internet is a valuable tool for youth and the online world provides young people with a safe arena for rehearsing and exploring aspects of identity and personal relationships that may not be available elsewhere (Buckingham, 2008). Youth nowadays then use social media and internet to share their feeling, experience, and information. From youth point of view, each social media application has its distinctive function. They also divide people they want to interact based on the type of their social media platform. There are certain platforms in which they allow their parents to participate within. However, there are also some platforms in which dedicated to only friends—they intentionally avoid their parents and extended family member on it.

Author: “Do you agree that it is okay to be followed by parents in social media?”
Informant: “I do agree, in a particular social media there it is okay to be followed by your parents. But on the other hand, in some other platforms should be more private for youth.”
Author: “What do you mean by that platform? And which one is okay to be followed by parents?”
Informant: “[on applications] such as Ask.fm or Snapchat, our parents probably do not need to be involved. But, in the social media that widely used, it is okay for them to follow me; such as Facebook or WhatsApp.”
—Informant L, interview

Social media and internet offer various features and functions that the digital native can use and experiment with (Buckingham, 2008). However, due to lack of what Buckingham (2008) calls as “digital literacy,” the digital native tends to follow what is presented and discussed on the internet. From their vast variety of experiences, they derive it more from social media and internet than from their parents. In youth calculation, they receive more information from online than offline interaction between generations (Madden, et al, 2013; Wendt, 2014). Furthermore, in digital natives’ perspective, the lessons from digital immigrant instructors are not worth their attention compared to everything else they experience on the internet (Prensky, 2001). This lack of mutual respect between generations is what we labeled as an asymmetrical relation.

For a long time, we believe, as suggested by
Geertz (1973), that knowledge or comprehension of one’s surroundings has come from predecessors. Now, the tables are turned and the digital natives have more experience compared to the predecessor, regarding the digital world. In fact, the digital immigrants now need to be taught to use social media by their children. The digital immigrant is following and learning how to use new media.

Youth understand that in past the children need to follow and obey their parents’ instructions strictly. However, youth think their parents’ guidance no longer suitable for their generation. In modern era, youth can get more information that suits their preferences from social media and internet. Furthermore, in social media, they have privilege—far away from parental control—in expressing their thought, belief, or feeling. Some informants articulate that being interfered by earlier generation in social media would be annoying because their parents already control youth’ lives in the offline world.

“I think once upon a time it is all parents centered. I feel when I am not staying at home, they will ask me to solve problems, see me as a person, although the interaction pattern usually reverts back every time I am staying at home. Considering you do not meet the people face to face, so there is more control in terms of keeping your privacy private. That is why I prefer not being Friend with my parents on social media.”

—Informant A, interview

Neglecting their predecessor’s role, youth channel their curiosity to supporting environment that can accommodate their needs of acknowledgment or achievement. To such a concern, Wendt (2014) states that modern technologies indeed enable the user, his/her image, and his/her network integrate into a single digital image on the surface, but this capability leaves little room for reflection (Prensky, 2001). In that sense, one important point is a reflection of self. Stern (2008) explains that such a “…self-inquiry is not conducted in isolation, but rather in the context of, and through feedback from, meaningful others.” Reflection is significant mechanism that enables us, according to many theorists, to generalize “mental models” from our experience. It is, in many ways, the process of “learning by doing”—a pivotal means of identity attainment (Buckingham, 2008).

One key finding of this study suggests that youth’ identity attainment is deeply influenced by internet and social media than their parents. This phenomenon caused by youth preference of reflection; they tend to choose internet than parents as their source of reflection. The parents do not know what their children do; the children are avoiding their parents on the internet. This situation ensures young people’ freedom to visit any sites and other online maneuvers. Houck et al. (2014) identify that while youth may be more digitally savvy than their parents, serious negative outcomes may result from their lack of maturity and inattention to the consequences. At most extreme cases, they even get involve into serious crime attempts—such as hacking, pornography, and other risky activities—which are being referred to the “dark side” of the internet.

Conclusion

The earlier generation failed—more or less—to cope with cultural and social transformation in the internet era. As Palfrey and Gasser (2008) states, it is difficult for parents and teachers who have no online identity to be credible, particularly if their children or students are digital natives. That is why the digital natives tend to trust the social media and internet as their primary source of reflection.

The distant and asymmetrical relations between the native and immigrant shape a thick boundary between those two generations. The cases we present here—sexting, cyberbullying, and dangerous selfies—show that from that interaction gap, the absence of parents/predecessor in youth/digital natives’ identity attainment, risky and dangerous consequences could arise. Our findings reveal that personal validation as part of identity attainment that youth try to achieve somehow drives them to different direction.
Some of youth behavior in digital technology could harm themselves—such as selfies and sexting—but the greatest concern we stress here is that the consequences of their behavior could escalate into broader community. Even the Indonesia government already suffered from the dangerous effect of this asymmetrical relation, especially when youth promote radicalism. The state later expressed the need of “internet savvy combatant” to fight the radicalism in the online world. Up to recent days, radicalism still the main issue in social media because the propaganda is not promoted through a website but delivered through personal accounts such as Facebook, Twitter and other platforms which used by youth far within their parents’ grasp. Eventually, such phenomenon elevates the important question. It is no longer how young people learn with technology. Rather, what they need to know about it. To such notion Buckingham (2008) gives a hint, which resonates our future suggestion, that they need the digital literacy.

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