Identity Constructions through Language in Virtual Community

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Abstract—*This paper aims to examine the role of language used in female daily forums to construct the identity of the Suhu. Since, the absence of face to face communication in this virtual community, leaves only text and image in the forum as the only identity (discourse) understood by other forum members. Suhu refers to a special member who has ability to answer problems of other members about products from a certain brand. There are bluepanda the suhu for Sulwashoo; Nate88, the suhu for Erha21 and snowyland, the suhu for Secretkey. They constructed their identity in the forum so that other members trusted them and even mistook bluepanda for a beauty advisor from Sulwashoo. We use Foucault's perspective of discourse. Identity according to Foucault requires recognition from others, formed by a series of opinions which involve confirmation, in this case by other forum members. 4 categories are found, as the content generated by the Suhu. (1) all uploaded information related to brands/products, (2) Suhu's opinions on brands/products, (3) information link and (4) venting and solution giving.The other member recognize the Suhu from the content that they generate. They use language that has permitted to use by Femaledaily Network as the company who owns the forum. The usage of slangs which are comfortable to use is considered important. It is even include as a strategy to draw more members*.

Keywords - identity construction, virtual community, language, femaledaily forum, suhu

I. INTRODUCTION

The development of new media brings forth a series of changes, especially in virtual reception. Interactive features in new media also enrich the users' perspective when they use the media. It's especially related with difference in the users' time, distance and location experiences, forming virtual identity, community and sense of membership in new media [1]. It is also related with the shift of users' perceptions on mediated virtual interaction (computer-mediated-communication) and biological interaction (face-to-face). In a more general sense, new media also impacts organizational pattern and production at macro level. It shifts media ownership, media culture, industry, economy, access, control and regulations.

The implications above are inseparable from the characters of the new media, which are digital, interactive, hypertextual, virtual, networked and simulated [2]. The shift from old to new media so that information which existed in the past doesn't just disappear. Virtual means not 'real'. This character makes members of virtual communities freely display themselves differently from themselves in the real world. Networked means there are several networks which strengthen each other to help people find and use virtual communities in finding information. Meanwhile simulated refers to virtual communities which are part of the new media which are closely related to imitation or simulation. Every content which appears on virtual community has great possibility of being imitated by the users.

Virtual community is one of the impacts of the development of new media. It's because virtual community meets all characters of new media by Lister. Virtual community is digital because it can't move beside on digital platform. It's interactive because the members of virtual community can have two-way communication in real time. Hypertextual means every existing information on the old media such as television, radio, and newspaper is put into the new media with adjusted appearance. It serves as a transfer database

One of the virtual communities in Indonesia is Female Daily Community which is under the management of Female Daily Network (FDN). It claims that most of its members, even up to 99%, are technologically literate women who enjoy sharing information with other members (*Anonim, Kisah Sukses Hanifa Ambaddar dan Affi Siregar Membawa Female Daily menjadi Forum Wanita Terbesar di Indonesia, 2016*). Here, community is a part of the business strategy of the founder and CEO (Chief of Corporation) of *Female Daily*, Hanifa Ambaddar. According to her, networking and making connection are the value added of a social media business. As stated by Seth Godin, a writer, entrepreneur and marketer, "You can use social media to turn stranger into friend, friend into customer, and customer into seller.[3]

The phenomenon of virtual community affects the language often used by the members. A certain language may not be understood by some people who aren't members of a particular community. There is no specific name for the language diversity, so it's referred to as the language of female daily virtual community.

Language use becomes one of the most important aspects of expression given action of the *suhu*. The *skincare talk!* Forum which the *suhu* use becomes a media for self-disclosure since the *suhu* who become centers of reference for other members require important self-disclosure. It's because (1) it brings out positive behavior on oneself and to

other and (2) self-disclosure reinforces the importance of the relation with other people [4]

II. RESEARCH METHODS

We use netnograhpy to analyze the data we get from the participants. It is new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnography research techniques to the study of culture and community emerging through computer-mediated-communication.

We have three participants who are willing to give us permission to analyze their accounts. They are nate88, snowyland, and bluepanda.

III. DISCUSSION AND RESULT

The researchers tried to analyze the identity constructions using discourse perspective. In accordance with the discourse perspective developed by Foucault, the identities of the members of *skincare talk!* forum of *femaledaily* can't stand on their own. It means that the identities must reflect the others and are inseparable from the recognition by other forum members. As an illustration, bluepanda wouldn't exist or be recognized as a *suhu* if they didn't have any friend network or wasn't listed in any thread. As described above, *femaledaily* network has features which allow the users to only display their names and hide other information, so that only certain members can access the information. This is where subject presence discourse operates. For someone who isn't listed as a forum member, bluepanda doesn't exist and therefore bluepanda is also not in *femaledaily* forum. This is why identity according to Foucault requires recognition from others, formed by a series of opinions which involve confirmation, in this case by other forum members. However, just as how Foucault discusses subject in episteme that the subject is present in language and not in God or human which he considers are dead, text and image in forum are the only identity (discourse) understood by other forum members (the other).

Moreover, discourse isn't only understood as a series of words or textual propositions, but also produce others. So, the main issue of discourse is who produces discourse and what is the effect of the discourse. It's then concluded that discourse is always related to power, who's in power and who's marginalized. "Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere" [5]

Some of Foucault's views on power are different from the general definition of power. Power in Foucault's view isn't owned but practiced in a social space. It's realized in arrangements, rules, regulatory systems, where there are humans who have certain interrelation with the world. Moreover, power doesn't work negatively and repressively, but positively and productively. It means that power strategy doesn't work through oppression, but normalization and regulation, i.e. upholding and punishing to discipline.

This power strategy is used by *femaledaily network* in the forms of rules which must be obeyed by the members. These rules must be known and observed when the members upload contents to the forums. There are some sanctions given by the admins in each forum on forum members who violate them. The sanctions could be content removal or banning a member from uploading any content within a certain period.

Because I think on Female Daily people, especially in the past, review honestly. If you fake it or copy it from somewhere else, you will be banned. That's how it is. That's how far they go. If you're found to have lied or something, you'll be banned. So I trust them. I still do. Especially because I was active there in the past, so I knew it when someone suddenly disappeared. (source: interview with bluepanda, 23 November 2018).

The banned status even appeared on the account profile of the user in question.

Figure. 1
Sample of Banned Account

The rules can be found when someone enters *femaledaily* network page. They'll find several articles under Term and Conditions. There is also a Code of Conduct which must be observed. Also, there are some rules in the subchapter *By Uploading Content onto Female Daily and Participating in the Community*, *User* is expected to agree on some conditions on their behaviors. Lastly, *Female Daily Network* ask the member to follow some stipulations on uploaded content.

The terms and articles on the page reinforced the power of *Female Daily Network* over the members. They must do and/or not do some things if they wanted to maintain their membership in Female Daily virtual community.

The researchers will only describe the stipulations on uploaded content considering it was the reference of the *suhu* and other members when they produced texts.

Therefore, the researchers analyze some samples of written language used in the forum, especially by the *suhu* and other forum members, after being adjusted with the purpose, to determine the expression given aspect in the conversation texts in the forum. The categories were : a. all uploaded information related to brands/products, b. *Suhu*'s opinions on brands/products, c. information link and d. venting and solution giving.

a. All uploaded information on brands/products

As forum members who were considered *suhu*, the opinions and responses of bluepanda, nate88 and snowyland were highly anticipated. The *suhu* were often mentioned in conversations when members were discussing something. Mention is a feature to call related *suhu* to give a comment or response.

In fact, bluepanda and snowyland wrote information on products released by *Sulwashoo* and *Secret*

key which were put on the front page of the forum. The product information became some kind of FAQ and frequently asked question. With this information, new members were expected to not ask similar questions. After reading the information uploaded by bluepanda and snowyland, they were expected to ask other questions. Therefore, since one opened a thread of a brand, they could find out who was the *suhu* on the forum by observing who was used as reference in *FAQ* answers.

Bluepanda uploaded contents on *Sulwashoo* products. The contents included *Sulwashoo* official link to show products which have been released by the brand. Then, bluepanda gave brief information on each product based on their experience in using the product. Lastly, bluepanda suggested which products should be bought by forum members.

In terms of discursive language, the researchers found several terms or jargons used by bluepanda. For example, in text point 6, *FB : Princess Keiko. This one doesn't seem to be a FD member.* FD is short for *Female Daily.* It means that Princess Keiko wasn't a member of *Female Daily* community which hinted that forum members wouldn't find Princess Keiko's account on any forum on *femaledaily*. The classification was unavoidable. The terms FD member and non-FD members caused senses of *we-ness* and *they-ness* which were forms of a shared identity in the community. In turn, this encouraged a sense of belonging to the community. This was in line with Forsyth's statement that *groups have a sense of 'we-ness' that enables members to identify themselves as belonging to a distinct entity (Forsyth, 2006). Femaledaily network* regularly held offline activities by gathering the members to enhance the sense of belonging in the community. The offline activities were the 5th business strategy of ke-5 *Femaledaily*[6]

There were other terms, such as *cumuk* which is short for *cuci muka* or washing face. The term was commonly used by the *suhu* and members of *Femaledaily* forum and was a part of the language they used in the forum. Another term was *racun* (poison) which according to Indonesian Dictionary means 1. a substance (gas) which could cause pain or death (if consumed, inhaled),-2. *Chem* a substance which reduces the quality of metal or gilding; 3. a substance which damages or inhibits catalytic or enzymatic action; 4. that which destroys the mind (kbbi web.id). On *femaledaily* forum, the word *racun* refers to a new product suggested by the *suhu* to be used by the members and is considered very tempting. So, it was common to find people saying, for example,

> *Because I read this thread I was poisoned to try SK Black Out Pore Minimizing Pack.. and on koreabuys there was a discount so it was just 67.500! but the delivery requires forwarding over 100k.. sobs.. if anyone is interested, let's buy it together so we can save the shipping fee (Wennykyuuto's account, Secret Key thread of femaledaily forum).*

b. *Suhu*'s Opinion on Brand/Product

One of the most highly anticipated contents was the *Suhu*'s opinion on certain products on the brand forum. Bluepanda had summarized their opinion on every product they had used on the FAQ page above. One of them was

Sulwashoo herbal facial wash she used. *My HG soap...although it's a bar of soap, it's not rough, lasts a long time and is very clean. It also clears the skin. It definitely smells like ginseng (bluepanda, FAQ of Sulwashoo forum of female daily.*

My HG soap or *my Holy Grail soap* means their best soap. The term was commonly found when discussing must-have products and the reasons why people should have them. In the glossary, *mybeauty journal* website defines Holy Grail as a term commonly used for essential beauty product one trusts and uses every day[7]

Beside *HG*, the term *DC* or Discontinued was also often found. It refers to certain products which are no longer produced. Other terms, such as *OOT* or *Out of Topic*, *BO* or *Break Out (damaged facial condition)*, and *IMO* or *In My Opinion*, are also often used in conversations on *femaledaily* community forums.

Figure. 2
Sample of Content Uploaded by Snowyland when
Giving Opinion of a Product

Source : femaledaily.com

In terms of word choice, snowyland's vocabulary was taken from day-to-day conversation which was adopted into virtual forum. Combination of Indonesian, English and even local languages were understood by people they talked to. It was because in female daily network these languages were commonly used, not only on virtual community forums, but also other articles.

An interesting finding was made. The word *Mak* was used by the members to greet each other. One of the examples was snowyland's post above. *@ryanese, I just tried my cece's STE regular, but I just touched it once..imo it doesn't match my night regime..I haven't tried STE rose...which eye cream do you use maak?*

The vocative word *mak* was used on nearly all forums on *femaledaily* virtual community along with foreign words and product names which are occasionally difficult to pronounce. Usually, the vocative word *mak* is associated with women from lower social class. According female activist and feminist researcher, Ruth Indiah Rahayu, the terms *emak* and *ibu* have very different ideological contents. *Emak* is for the lower social class, while *ibu* is for the upper social.[8]

This contradicts the profile of the members of female daily community who are generally women from upper social class. According to Hanifa Ambaddar, the CEO of Female Daily Network, 60 percent of the members of female daily members were professionals, 20 percent were entrepreneurs, while the rest was students and housewives. The age range was 25 to 35 years old, and 70 percent of

FDN members lived in Jakarta, while the rest lived in other major cities such as Bandung and Surabaya[9]

The vocative word *Mak* had undergone a shift from the original meaning which addresses a woman who is one's biological mother. In Indonesian Dictionary, *mak* means 1. Female parent; Mother; 2. Term for a woman who deserves to be called mother or equal to mother [10]. Today, the term *mak* is commonly used for women regardless of age and motherhood. Now, *emak* is a slang which doesn't only refer to a married woman who is a parent, but also an adult and unmarried woman.

The usage of slangs which are comfortable to use on *femaledaily* virtual community was considered important. It was even a strategy to draw more members. In an online article, Hanifa has stated that a combination of content and language style is a way to make more people visit the website (https://marketing.co.id/female-daily-baurkan-kualitas-dan-gaya-bahasa/).

When uploading content, the *suhu* and other forum members must follow a set of rules they had agreed on. Ever since they registered to be a member, they were considered to have known the rules and to intend to follow them. It was consistent with Foucault's statement that power doesn't work negatively and repressively, but positively and productively, i.e. by a set of binding rules.

One of the contents which show snowyland's cautiousness to not be considered violating the rules can be seen in the screenshot above. *@dington nope, they've lest a long time ago maak… around agt-sept if I recall correctly …there's just BHA and b*enton is pretty good..I'll VM the details later..I don't want to be OOT here…*

Snowyland mentions another *brand* on the Secret Key thread. However, the rule stipulated staying on the theme. Mentioning another brand was considered being out of topic. Therefore, to avoid sanction from the administrator, snowyland sent private message to a member called *dington* about information of the brand.

c. As Information Link

The *suhu*'s mastery was often misunderstood to mean that the *suhu* were company representatives. Bluepanda was thought to be a Beauty Advisor of *Sulwashoo*. Beauty advisor is a person who works for a brand to explain the types, functions and uses of the brand's products.

> *I often get annoyed when members keep asking things. So now on the second thread it says "read page 1!" there wasn't anything like it before. I noted the pages, I remembered them. I wrote them down so that people wouldn't keep asking the same things. That was why I was annoyed, because it was repeated. Some people even thought I was a BA of Sulwhasoo. They mentioned me "are you the BA?" "no" I said. They thought I was secretly a BA who marketed things, which annoyed me, because we can't sell things on the forum. They thought I was selling things. "no", I told them. "I really use them" (source: interview with bluepanda, 27 November 2018).*

Members often asked about brand company policies to the *suhu* due to this misunderstanding. Usually the *suhu* would give them the contact information of the

representatives in question or relay information from the representatives to members who need the information.

Figure. 3
Sample of Snowyland's Informational Content
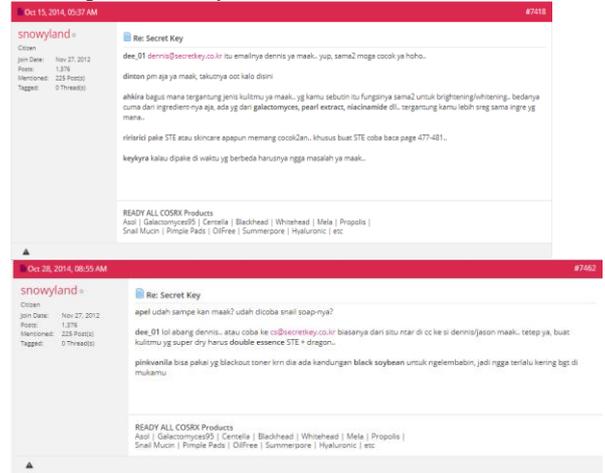
On her upload, snowyland provide the email address of the representative of *Secretkey*. This was related to a question from dee_01 on the ingredients of a certain *Secretkey* product. Snowyland claimed to not know in detail the composition and content of the product, so they suggested dee_01 to directly as the brand representative.

d. Venting and Solution Giving

Sometimes, the contents uploaded by the *suhu* were venting on products they had used. Sometimes the *suhu* were upset because they couldn't provide information for the members.

Figure. 4
Nate88's Venting

Nate88's purpose in joining *femaledaily* virtual community was sharing information. Nate88 used the function of the virtual community as a place to vent. *@intanmntr : sorry Say (Darling), I can't help you because it's very technical. You should show it to a doctor to be sure* (Nate88's upload). Similarly, Herring (1996) states that *Indeed, virtual community messages tend to express views, provide and request information, express feeling, and suggest solutions.* [11]

IV. CONCLUSION

The emergence of new media have a consequence on the rise of virtual community. They often have term and condition including on language usage. *Female Daily network* have rules on this matter that has to obey by its member including the *Suhu.*

Their identity disclose when they generate content about some brand therefore the other member recognize them. The language used by suhu and members is not stilted

Indonesian but a *slang* and comfortable one. It is combination of Indonesian, English and even regional language such as Javanese or Sundanese. Since this is the kind of Indonesian language permitted by the company to use as the communication tools.

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