



INNOVATIVE: Journal Of Social Science Research

Volume 4 Nomor 4 Tahun 2024 Page 1386-1398

E-ISSN 2807-4238 and P-ISSN 2807-4246

Website: <https://j-innovative.org/index.php/Innovative>

Social Identity of Teenagers Playing Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) in Surabaya

Janottama Dharmmesta Fawwaz Yudianto^{1✉}, Ira Darmawanti²

Universitas Negeri Surabaya

Email: janottama.20064@mhs.unesa.ac.id^{1✉}

Abstrak

Massive Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (MMORPG) merupakan suatu lingkungan virtual yang menjadi dunia baru bagi suatu individu. Identitas sosial memiliki pengaruh yang besar terhadap perspektif, perilaku, dan sikap suatu individu, khususnya bagi remaja 18-22 tahun yang masih mencari jati dirinya. Arti identitas sosial bagi suatu individu masih belum banyak ditelusuri oleh peneliti-peneliti secara mendalam. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggali identitas sosial yang ada pada remaja pemain MMORPG di Surabaya. Penelitian ini mempunyai lima subjek dan pengambilan data menggunakan wawancara. Analisis data yang digunakan adalah interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) dengan berdasarkan Teori Identitas Sosial Versi Indonesia. Hasil penelitian menemukan tema-tema yang muncul secara berpola pada subjek, yaitu identifikasi sebagai pemain, terpengaruhnya perilaku, emosi saat bermain, hubungan interpersonal dengan pemain lain, dan reaksi terhadap opini eksternal.

Kata Kunci: *Identitas Sosial, Remaja Surabaya, Massive Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (MMORPG)*

Abstract

Massive Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (MMORPG) is a virtual environment and is a new world for an individual to explore. Social identity plays a crucial role in an individual's perspective, behaviour, and attitude, especially for 18-22 years old teenagers who are still finding out where they fit in the world. A deep exploration of what social identity means to an individual is still scarcely explored. Hence, this research aims to unveil the social identity in Surabaya teenagers who plays MMORPG. This research is conducted on five subjects and the data is collected through interviews. The Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method is also used to analyze the subject's responses and using the Teori Identitas Sosial Versi Indonesia theory. This study found emerging themes across all subjects which are identification as a player, affected behaviour, emotions while playing, interpersonal connection with other players, and reaction on external opinions.

Keywords: *Social Identity, Surabayan Teenagers, Massive Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (MMORPG)*

INTRODUCTION

Social interaction is synonymous with daily lives nowadays. This led to individuals needing to have their own self-identity to find where they fit in a social settings, whether it's in the scope of social media, the general public, or a specific group. Hogg & Terry (2014) explained social identity as a belonging, caring, and proud feeling; which stems from an individual's knowledge of categorizing themselves as a member of a social environment with regards of other members in said environments, even without having an interpersonal relation, without requiring deep knowledge of the group or its members, or without the need of having the same motivation and interest as the members of the group. In other words, social identity is a conceptual part of one's self based on one's knowledge of its membership/belonging in a specific group. Social identity stems from values, emotion, involvements, care, and pride over one's membership/belonging in a specific group.

Alviano & Saloom (2017) have developed the base social identity theory founded by Tajfel (1971) without altering its purpose in any way, in other words, as pure/close as possible. This adaptation was tested to and made for Indonesians, and the result was *Teori Identitas Versi Indonesia* or The Indonesian Version of Social Identity Theory, in which stands on: (1) categorization, an aspect that refers to one's tendency to shape one's own social environment by subscribing to one or more group or social category that hold significant meaning to one's self, (2) sense of belonging, a feeling that can be developed due to a social system comprised of a number of interacting people and are involved in an activity together, or due to a number of people involved in social interactions in a frequent and/or a prolonged manner, (3) positive attitude, refers to one's behaviour based on certain in-group

values and views towards life, and more importantly, social life. When subscribed to a particular social group or category, one's behaviour and attitude shows a positive bias on the group actions, views, or stances, even though it might be viewed as negative outside the group or in the public norm (Hogg & Terry, 2014).

In this day and age, technological advancements makes it easy and convenient for two or more individuals separated even by space and/or time to communicate, one of which is the internet. According to Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI), internet is a part of the electronic communications system that can connect through networks of various facilities the internet has to offer, across the globe. Internet was beginning to be used in the middle of the 1990s (Suwardika & Mustanda, 2017). This opened new advancements on video games in which internet can now be integrated into video games, generating online video games. The growth of online video games grew exponentially and fast. By the 2000s, esports was born, a breed between sports and online video games. Following its predecessors, esports it's own individual segment also grew fast and started to spread globally, Indonesia was one of the countries in which esports grew, even now. Esports itself at the very core is an online video game competition usually between two parties competing to achieve a goal set by the game, often to win a prize of some sort.

Indonesia, as a country with a big population count, gains a very significant growth in internet use. This was proven by Hootsuite's survey on 2023 titled "Digital 2023 Indonesia" which states that the count of internet users in Indonesia aged 16 to 64 is around 215 million people, or roughly 77% of Indonesia's population, and that number is predicted to grow bigger in the future. This makes Indonesia one of the countries in the world with a large internet user count, and an internet-user-to-population-ratio. That survey also explains that due to the large number of internet users in Indonesia, then the players of online video games will grow in tandem with it. Hootsuite's (2023) data also investigated the purpose of which internet is used for in Indonesia, and found that 42.3% of internet users in Indonesia use internet to play online video games, with an average playtime of 1 hour and 15 minutes per day.

Online video games in it of itself is split into multiple categories/genres. However, this research focuses on the genre of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (MMORPG). In MMORPG, players positioned themselves in-game by controlling a fictional character inside of the game environment. Moreover, player can also manipulate and create their character how they please with the given options in the game. This creates the ability to differentiate characteristics of players from the characteristics of their character in-game. Aspects that can be set in-game includes (but not limited to) age, gender, race, physical

features, voice, even species (Fuster et al, 2014). This fictional character can interact in real-time with other fictional character controlled by other player, or by the computer system (NPCs [Non-Playable Characters]), all with the power of the internet. This eliminates the need to meet or make contact physically in order to interact, whether it's between two people or many more. The multiplayer interaction through the actions of the in-game fictional character enable players to work together in order to achieve a goal, or to compete and go against one another to achieve their on goal.

For this research, the decision to focus on MMORPG instead of other online video game genres is supported by Gabbiadini (2016), which states that research on MMORPG are very relevant with the social interaction in Shared Virtual Environments where users are able to interact in real-time as if they are in real-life. Gabbiadini (2016) also mentioned that although the research in Virtual Reality (VR) social interaction has been done many times, MMORPG is the only environment where players can commit to the environment and the settings in-game, which comprises of graphical presentations and virtual interactions, especially when the graphics and all the other game aspects are made to be immersive, through the actions of the controlled characters in-game. That very aspect resembles social interaction in the real world. Therefore, forms of social interaction in a Shared Virtual Environment (SVE) may actually happen in daily lives in the real world. The SVE itself can very well be a place where one makes most of their daily social interactions.

Previously, points about esports was mentioned, which plays a role in the decision of excluding professional esports players from this research. This is supported by the discovery from Sianipar (2022) where it was found that professional esports players tend to be detached from the immersion in-game, hence lacking the social identity in the game itself. This is due to esports being their professional job with a clear real-life-oriented-goal in mind (winning trophies, making money, making names, practicing for a match, team coordination, etc), not as a means of entertainment or a desire to interact in-game.

Even though this research focuses on a digital space, Surabayan teenagers was chosen as the subjects of this research. According to The Enciety Business Consult [EBC] (2017), gamers in Surabaya on average spends anywhere around 2 to 8 hours a day playing video games, which goes above the average playtime for Indonesians according to Hootsuite's survey (2017). This happens because the infrastructure of Surabaya itself supports the growth of technology, and in this case online video games, really well. For one, internet cafes or *warnet* spreads across Surabaya, with facilities capable of fulfilling one's desires to play online video games without owning their own devices. This very data supports the representations of the subjects on its population.

It should also be noted that according to Harrel & Lim (2017), an individual's social identity in-game can be different and could change across gaming platforms (PC [Personal Computer], XBox, PlayStation, Mobile, etc). This research focuses on one device, the PC. This decision was supported by Harrel & Lim (2017) which states that PC is the kickstarter and the source of other mainstream gaming platform. PCs generally have more features available to it compared to other gaming platforms that tries to adapt PCs features into itself optimally.

Previous research such as Hammu & Wei (2017) found and complained about a knowledge gap especially between an individual and the effect(s) of playing a certain video game. It was said that all these time, the majority of research focuses on when a psychological phenomenon happens, instead of investigating the process it takes for an individual to be considered as the phenomenon itself. Social identity itself is one of the contributing factors to the phenomena, concepts, and broader interaction regarding one's identity and/or affected by one's identity (Harrel & Lim, 2017).

Other researchers diving into the same type of research also complained about the lack of understanding of one's psychological experience in playing online video games, one of which is the lack of investigation on player's social identity, one of the base factors of other psychological phenomenon. Up until now, research in this field is heavily dominated by quantitative research which determines at what point players experiences a psychological phenomenon, instead of investigating how, why, or unveiling the experience of the players itself, all of which contributed to the player experiencing the psychological phenomenon. Kaye & Pennington (2016) commented that the reason players feel a deep connection to their in-game group, needs a deeper research, and that interviews will give more of an understanding at that. They also mentioned that qualitative research are needed in order to dig the complexity of social identity on online video game communities, one suggestion was a thorough interview.

That being said, this research aims to contribute in filling the knowledge gap left behind by previous researchers by investigating Surabayan teenage MMORPG-player's qualitatively and deeply, so that in the future, more research on the topic on different type of subjects can be conducted, hence providing an even deeper understanding of said topic, and in turn help to fill even more of that knowledge gap.

The investigation of social identity on Surabaya teenagers that plays MMORPG is needed to provide knowledge on players behaviour and attitudes in socializing, hence revealing the dynamics of interactions in a virtual shared environments. This is because teenagers is the prime age of an individual finding their own self and where they fit in the

world, hence the social identity dynamics in them has not fully developed yet (Indrawan & Candrasari, 2023). The age range in which a teenager reaches independence, idealistic thinking, abstract thinking, showing their own identity is in the 18-22 years old (Surbakti, 2017). Teenagers in these age range spends a lot of their time outside of the primary environment, family. This also contributes to physical and psychological growth on a teenager (Surbakti, 2017).

The urgency of this research lies in it becoming one of the foundations of future developments on technology, specifically online video games and Shared Virtual Environments (SVEs), which grows exponentially faster as time passes. With that being said, this research aims to investigate social identity on MMORPG-playing Surabayan teenagers. Hence the aforementioned knowledge gap starts fo fill up.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach in order to understand a deep meaning and context of the phenomenon (Cresswell & Poth, 2016). The qualitative method allows the research to focus on a small amount of subject, representative to the population. Additional response can also be gathered outside of the research focus in order to support, deny, or to find a deeper reasoning to responses. According to Saputra, Suryani, & Pranata (2021), phenomenological approach focuses on the individual experience and subjective perspective on the topic or phenomenon.

Purposive sampling is used to gather the subjects used in this research, which according to Miller et al (2018) is a subject-picking method with a certain criteria decided by the researcher and with consideration on the topic of research. The subject criteria for this research are:

1. Teenagers aged 18-22 years old
2. Originates from Surabaya, or have lived in Surabaya for more than 6 months
3. Plays online video game with MMORPG genre with a minimum total playtime of 20 hours
4. Willing to participate on this research.

Interview questions are based on the theory developed by Alviano & Saloom (2017), *Teori Identitas Sosial Versi Indonesia* or Indonesian Version of Social Identity Theory. The reason being is that *Teori Identitas Sosial Versi Indonesia* not only develop Tajfel's (1971) original social identity theory as pure as possible without alteration to a specific topic, but also because it integrated previous developments on Tajfel's (1971) theory and condensed it into what it is now. The interview uses a semi-structured approach which will aid the

research in gaining additional response outside of the research focus in order to support, deny, or to find a deeper reasoning to responses given.

The data from the subjects was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as explained by Miller (2018), it is a contemporary qualitative research methods with roots in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. This method is suited for this research because philosophical principles is a strong aspect in this research.

The validity of the data gathered was also confirmed via member checking. Mekarisce (2020) explained that member checking is a form of data confirmation involving the research subject, after the data gathering phase. This makes it so the response that was gathered and turned into data can be added, denied, reduced, or corrected by the subject in order to provide a validate data. The process of member checking is sealed with the subjects signing a declaration that they have done member checking.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the purposive sampling methods, five subjects that fulfill the criteria was selected randomly from a pool of google form responses. Details are as follows:

Table 1. Subject's Details

Subject	Age	Gender	Occupation
Subject A	20 years old	Male	Student
Subject B	19 years old	Male	-
Subject C	21 years old	Female	Student
Subject D	22 yeas old	Female	Employee
Subject E	18 years old	Male	Student

Based on the response gained from the subjects and with accordance to the IPA steps provided by Miller (2018), five recurring themes across all subjects were discovered in this research:

Self-identification as A Player

It was found that teenagers in Surabaya when played for a total of more than 20 hours of online video games will identify and claim themselves to be a part of the playerbase of the game they play. This fact backed up previous research claims, one of which is Herawati's (2014) research on reality construct or 'second life' of online video gamers and how they form their own reality and virtual community. The research found that the 'second life', which

took place inside the online video game, holds a significant meaning for the subjects. The so called 'second life' also represented imaginations of the subjects and those imaginations can be manifested inside the online video game environment.

Both this research and Herawati's (2014) also found that the activities done by the subjects in-game creates emotional and sentimental bonds over their membership/belonging in their groups/communities in-game. This creates a want or desire for a player to interact with another player virtually inside the game.

With the theory by Alviano & Saloom (2022) in mind, this theme supported the categorization aspects of their theory in which found that subjects see themselves as a part of a certain group, community, or social category; and can also recognize individuals that are outside of their group as an 'outsider' or 'stranger'. This thought may come unconsciously for the subjects, as they may not realize or explicitly declare this opinion.

Other than that, subjects who identified themselves as a part of a game's playerbase or a specific group in-game, declares that it is important for them as a gamer. This further supports previous research claims on positive bias to the in-group and a relatively negative bias towards the out-groups. These biases will inevitably happen even though there is a desire to play gaming sessions alone by themselves instead of with a group. This is because the core fundamental for MMORPG is, as the name suggests, designed to be more optimal if played with other players.

Additionally, subjects feel happy when they consider themselves to be part of a certain groups of players in the game they play. Furthermore, it is found that with a title or a higher position in said groups (i.e. leader, co-leader), a sense of responsibility, respect, and pride will arise a lot more. Other than that, when given the question on "what will you feel and where will you be if you never joined that group in the first place", the response across all subjects were negative, a few thought that comes up are confused, lost, bored, even not interested at all in the game.

Affected Behaviour due to The MMORPG In-game Group Environment

Social environment plays a huge role in one's development, behavior, and attitude. As humans, one would want to be accepted by their social environment, hence they will adjust themselves to fit its norm and habits (Hardika, Noviekayati, & Saragih, 2019). It is found that subjects declared that their behaviour is affected by their in-game group. Examples given are subjects will do specific movement in-game like how their group is doing it, they have similar playstyles, they would speak using their own specific vocabulary or words that are

recognized and understood by the group, and they even learn how to socialize, adapt, and interact with other people; in which that skill itself can transcend from the virtual environment and give growth in similar real-life skills. A significant note in this, is that even when subjects try not to be affected by the behaviour of the members in-game, they will inevitably get affected in a shape and form.

These adapted behaviour from the group can have a subjective limit across subjects. In a given online video game title, sometimes there is a stereotype on gamers or the public surrounding the players in that title (Ramadhan & Komalawati, 2019). Subjects shown that they are aware of such stereotypes labeled by other game's playerbases or the public in the real world. However, the subjects states that they have self-control not to give in to the stereotype of the game they are playing. This proves that although an individual's behaviour will inevitably be affected by the group in-game, they have a sense of control over how much they get affected by. This finding give a new input to the statement by Indrawan & Candrasari (2023) where it is stated that teenagers is at the age range where they still looking for where they fit in society and the world, hence their own identity has not fully developed yet. The new input being, that teenagers in Surabaya who plays MMORPG can already draw a line or limit where they can enjoy MMORPG immersively, but still have a consciousness on how immersed they are, whether it concerns time, social settings, or social norms.

Emotional Feeling when Playing

It is found that when an individual consider themselves to be in an environment or group, there will be an emotional attachment that is sentimental to that individual on said environment or group. That statement plays a big role in the purpose of playing online video games, which is to achieve a certain goal that has been pre-decided either by the game itself or by the group, and also players have to try not to fail at the goal. In this case, subjects feel they will be happy, proud, and satisfied when a target or a goal in-game is achieved when playing together with other players in a group. Upon further digging, it is found that the previous statement would also happen even when they haven't fully know who they are playing with, in-game or in real life. Subjects also implied that these feelings would also rise a lot less if they were to reach these goals by themselves/alone/solo. This would support the narrative that MMORPG is meant to be played together with other players, hence the name.

Next, subject would also state that when they and their respective group failed to reach a goal or objective in-game, subjects would deal with it as if it is a negative stimulus. They would feel sad, upset, and angry if that happens. However subjects would apply coping

mechanisms and defense mechanisms to deal with that scenario, a few examples are dissociation and rationalization. This is evident by responses such as “oh it’s only a game”, putting it aside as something inconsequential. Furthermore, subjects would also take that outcome as somewhat of a learning experience, seeing it as a means of growth, and finding a silver lining on it, while being supportive of one another. However, what’s interesting is that this was not the case with positive outcome on the same scenario. When they do reach a goal in-game, they would feel happy, proud, and satisfied, as mentioned before, they were immersed.

This would line up with Alviano & Saloom’s (2017) theory in which an individual joined in a group setting would try to defend the actions, protect, and try to develop the group in a positive manner. However, when a negative feeling or stimuli are present, coping mechanisms and defense mechanisms would take play.

Interpersonal Relationships with Other Players

As mentioned before, interactions with other players in the MMORPG scene is very crucial for the life of the game and for the players themselves, because that was what MMORPG designed for. This would also mean an easier progression and a wider access to parts of the game, if played with other players. Hence, interactions with other players is surely inevitable.

Moreover subjects mentioned that they were happy being in an environment or group that facilitates their interests and desires. That is because when an individual is with an environment or a group of people who holds the same interest as them, their conversations are much easier to understand, clearer, more understandable, more topics to branch off of, can learn from each other, and also synchronicity. This generates a sense of fondness and affection towards the subject’s respective environment or group.

With that being said, this discovery further adds credibility on Alviano and Saloom’s (2022) theory, a generation of positive bias on the group where an individual is in. Not only that, this also confirms Guegan et al’s (2015) discovery when it is found there is an in-group favoritism or bias on the members inside of a group an individual is joined in.

Reaction to External Opinion

The social identity on an individual would make them invest more time and energy into a social group they consider they belong in, they would also try to keep them in their lives, and try to develop or contribute to the group. It is found that when or if subjects joined a group that was labeled as different with comparison on the other group in the same MMORPG, they would search for a positive different-label rather than negative ones. They

would not care if their group was labeled negatively by other groups or players, they would deflect that statement and try to protect their group self-worth.

Furthermore, when faced with something more than a label, in this case a critique or a comment, subjects would accept critiques if given properly and not threatening or baseless. This was due to the subjects' desire to develop and grow their group further. However, a response of neglecting or ignoring said critiques may also happen, and this is because the subjects have already understood that everyone has a different view or way to do things, so they will ignore it.

Another thing that arises from these external opinions is that subjects would feel no shame in joining a certain group in-game or in playing a certain MMORPG title upon being commented or judged by other people in real-life or other players in-game. The fact that this is the case, added proof to Alviano & Saloom's (2022) theory where an individual will feel proud when joining a group they are fond of. This in turn, would help them cover up their sense of shame on their group, MMORPG-title's playerbase, or even themselves as a player; when commented by others.

Theoretical implications of this research is the grasp on the proof of the concept of social identity on Surabaya teenagers that plays MMORPG. Thus, it is discovered how they view themselves in the MMORPG environment or the group in-game. Methodological implications on the other hand, involved a proof and an act as a base/foundation for future research, and in turn help close the knowledge gap in similar research in the past.

Of course, there are limitations surrounding this research, one of which is the significant effort to find a schedule suitable for subjects to be interviewed, this is due to the subjects being in a lot of activities. Other than that, the media of interview, zoom meeting, prove to be a disturbance at times, this is due to the unstable connection in the region at times.

CONCLUSION

Surabayan teenagers who play MMORPG have a deep-rooted social identity on the game, variations of identity were discovered with uniqueness on each subject. Upon further investigation, five recurring themes across all subjects were discovered. Overall, this shows subject's positive bias on their in-game environment or group from their respective MMORPG title. Pride, joy, and satisfaction is the common theme when subjects achieve their in-game goal with their group. However, failing to do so, results in coping mechanisms, defense mechanisms, or dissociation from the game altogether. Other than that, External opinions may be positive and negative are mostly ignored.

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