



**SOCIAL MEDIA AS THE NEW WORD OF MOUTH  
STUDY ON INDONESIAN LARGEST INTERNET FORUM (KASKUS)**

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**Abstract**

New media as the product of communication technologies has generated communication evolution in society. It changes the way people communicate with others. Indonesia's Internet users have significantly increased for the last ten years. The majority of users use Internet as a medium of social interaction. It also goes along with the growing number of online community in cyberspace via Internet forum. Kaskus is the biggest Internet forum in Indonesia. The purpose of this research is to describe how communication technologies become a significant aspect in society development. It will explore Kaskus' roles in influencing individual decision. Ethnography virtual was used on this research. This research found that social media works as the new form of the powerful word of mouth in society. It brings a new way of creating public opinion. It became individuals' reference group in assessing themselves and shaping their attitudes towards particular topics or situation.

**Keywords:** Internet forum, social media, word of mouth, virtual ethnography

**INTRODUCTION**

The rise of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has brought the world to the new era. It helps people to communicate with others freely with no distance boundaries. Since communication intertwined in every aspect of human life, how people communicate influences the way society is formed. Moreover, all communication technology extends the human senses of touching, smelling, tasting, and (especially) hearing and seeing. Such extensions allow an individual to reach out in space and time, and thus obtain information that would not otherwise be available. McLuhan (1965) put it as "the extension of man".

New media as the product of communication technologies generate communication evolution in society. It changes the way people communicate with others. In the past, there are two basic divisions of communication channel: interpersonal channel which involves all kind of face to face channels versus mass media channel which involves radio, television, newspaper and all kind of media that have capacity to distribute its message to mass audience. The rise of the Internet changes that distinction. Internet possesses revolutionary functions of communication channel. It has the power to integrate all levels of communication; interpersonal communication, group communication, public communication and mass communication into one media. Communication scholars labeled this Internet power as media convergence.

Furthermore, in social world, interpersonal communication is believed to be more powerful to create more effective communication than other types of communication. "In fact, our beliefs, attitudes, and values are probably influenced more by interpersonal encounters than by the media or even by formal education" (Devito, 2007, p. 7). Interpersonal communication provides message exchange between communicator (message sender) and communicant (message receiver) in a more personal way than mass communication. Both communicator and communicant have the ability to supervise their communication act, which will increase communication effectively. Indeed, interpersonal communication serves as mediator for mass media to produce a great effect. People have known for years, that advertising is intended to influence consumer buyer decision. Therefore, people believe more in other people as the source of information than advertising as the source of information.

Realizing that interpersonal communication is more powerful in influencing people, marketing field recognizes word of mouth as one of influential marketing strategy nowadays. Moven and Minor (1997, p. 180) defined word of mouth (WOM) as an ideas and opinion exchanges between two or more consumers about their consumption experience that is not a marketing source. Which is means it is unpaid and voluntarily. Since it is unpaid and voluntary it is considered as the most powerful marketing strategy. People tend to believe more in other people's experience than to advertising since advertising is paid marketing communication and it was made intentionally by company to influence their target market. However, in this paper word of mouth does not always talk about individual's experience in order to make a recommendation and evaluation about goods and service, but it also discusses both positive and negative individual's experiences of goods, service, persons, events or a social phenomenon in order to influence others.

It has always been a human nature, to communicate in order to influence others. Supporting this argument, rhetorical tradition views communication as the art of discourse. Therefore, they labeled people as a Rhetors (persuasive speaker) who always engage in the art of persuasion in their daily activity (Craig & Muller, 2007). In explaining about the art of persuasion, Aristotle argued that people use their logic to construct or defend their argument (367 BC/2007). Presenting evaluation by making comparison is one way to construct an argument. We can label a politician as a good candidate because we identify other politician as a poor / bad candidate. In conclusion, word of mouth is an interpersonal communication that contains evaluation intended to influence others' opinion about ideas, individuals, events, goods and services.

In computer-mediated communication (CMC), a new topic called captology has arisen. In his book, *Persuasive Technologies*, BJ Fogg (2003) refers captology as the study of computer as persuasive technologies and focuses on the ways in which computers can influence beliefs, attitudes and behaviors such as making political persuasion. For example, it is used in? Persuading others to vote for specific individual or to support or oppose particular political positions. A Discussion on political campaigns and social media that was held on George Washington University (2010) argued that political campaign nowadays uses social media as one of their campaign strategies. Whether it is to build an image, deliver messages or get a vote.

With the emergence of web 2.0, new media possess the power of both interpersonal and mass communication. Not only facilitating communicator to distribute his message to mass audiences but also has the same power as interpersonal communication. Based on AON consulting research about how web 2.0 creating public opinion in employee communication (2009), social media messages spread rapidly and the feedback is nearly as fast, affecting and altering personal perceptions. With the increasing use of the Internet as a research and communications platform, social media have become an even more powerful and useful resource for transmitting messages in order to create public opinion.

According to Internet world stat report (2010), an International website that features up to date world Internet Usage, Population Statistics, Travel Stats and Internet Market Research Data, for over 233 individual countries and world regions; Indonesia's Internet users for the last ten years have been increasing significantly. This number goes along with the use of Internet as a medium of social interaction. People who use internet or later in this paper is referred as users, choose to interact in cyberspace using chatting facility, internet forum, mailing list, weblogs and also the most popular one, social networking site. In communication science, we labeled it as social media. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 60) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content."



Furthermore, the growing number of online community in cyberspace is due to the presence of Internet forum. Internet forum is online discussion site where ideas or information on particular issues can be exchanged. Dylan Stewart, a Mac guru in his video interview with video jug (2008) explained that Internet forum allows multiple users to chime in about their particular experience, information, tips, trick, etc. Overall, he added that Internet forum is a basic place where communities would come together and find information about various topics. The number of Internet forum in many countries were significantly arise in recent years. Refer to Big-boards report (2010) on forum ranking; the average post on Internet forum is more than 1 millions post each day. This number proves the intensity of public interest on online discussion site.

Generally speaking, research discovered there are two different categories of Internet forums: the first is global forum. This forum allows users to have discussion on variety of topics. There is no topic limitation. The other one is specific forum which specializes itself on specific theme, such as game forum, multimedia forum, wedding forum, etc. This segmentation results on different members of community. This differentiation also gives users basic knowledge on what kind of information they can expect on particular forum. Therefore, users consciously and actively choose a forum that they want to get involved in a particular discussion in order to gather and collect information about a particular topic.

In Indonesia there are numerous Internet forum. There is the global one such as Kaskus.us and the specific forum such as gemscool.com specializing in game forum, indowebster.com that specializes in multimedia content, and so forth. This segmentation assists people easier in trying to find any specific information. This research found that Kaskus.us is the biggest Internet forum in Indonesia. Kaskus.us have more than 2 million members and 70.000 posts each day. This number shows a high intensity of interaction between users on Kaskus.us. Moreover, in Alexa report (2012), a California-based subsidiary company of Amazon.com that is known for its toolbar and website and provides information about top sites in the world including their traffic statistics, Kaskus.us were ranked seventh as top sites in Indonesia. This rank was based on the combination of average daily visitors and page views over the past month.

The purpose of this research is to describe how communication technologies become a significant aspect in society development. It will explore Internet forum roles or Kaskus.us in particular as the product of communication technology in influencing individual decision. This paper also argue that social media is the new form of the powerful word of mouth in society. It became individuals' reference group in assessing themselves and shaping their attitudes towards particular topics or situation.

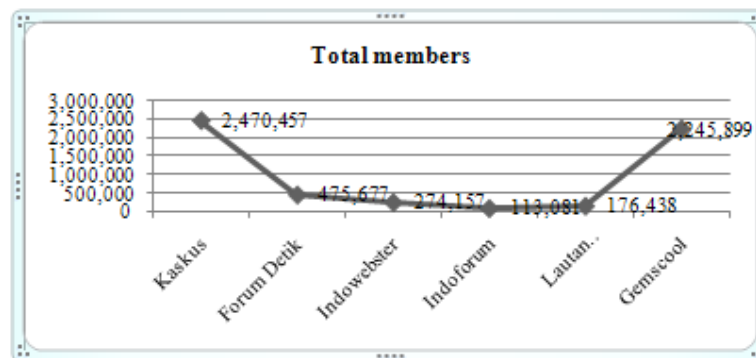


Chart 1. Total members on Indonesia's Internet forum on January 12, 2011

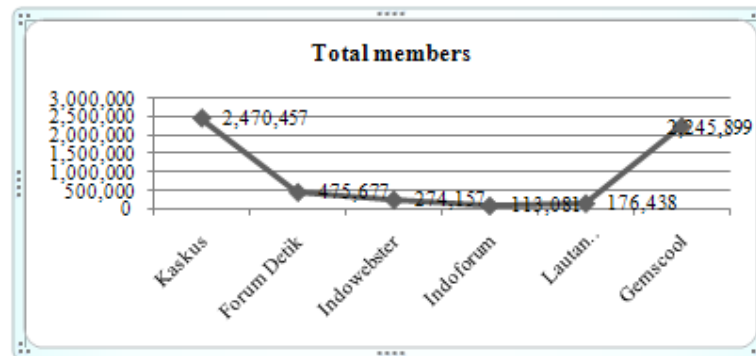


Chart 2. Total Post per day on January 12, 2011

## METHODS

As the rapid development of computer mediated communication, many studies explored the variety of phenomenon in cyberspace. Virtual ethnography is one of research methodology that proposes a method to study virtual world. It is one area of an ethnographic study that examines users interaction in the Internet network or cyberspace community. The key of virtual ethnography is on how to apply ethnography technique on virtual setting. This can be done by researcher's participation on virtual world that is being researched (Bryman, 2004, p. 473). In this research, researcher's participation was on kaskus.us. The advantage of doing participant observatory on virtual setting is the ability of automatically collecting and archiving data. Researchers only have to save the html address of particular page on an Internet forum, because this forum will continuously grow and flow.

The researcher became kaskus's member or kaskuser since 2008. She was not only observed users interaction on kaskus.us but also actively involved on conversation about particular topic, known as a thread. The unit of analysis on this research was kaskusers' interaction. Kaskusers' interaction can be observed via thread. Thread is a discussion topic in an Internet forum that enable forum member



to give comments by replying in the thread. During research, researcher also created several threads and observed how discussion flowing and going deeper among kaskusers.

Several in-depth interviews with several kaskuser were also conducted to complement and to strengthen participant observation that has been done. These interviews were carried out with the thread starter, a kaskuser who start a discussion by creating a thread and with kaskusers who reply the thread.

Adapting from Hine (2000) and Hine (n.d) there are several steps that should be executed on virtual ethnography:

1. Identify recurrent events
2. Participate on a MOO (Multiuser dungeon, Object oriented). Researchers have to actively involve in the virtual world that is being researched. MOO is defined as a text-based online virtual reality system to which multiple users (players) are connected at the same time (Shah & Romine, 1995, p. 238).
3. Inventory the entire communication components that create the recurrent events. Saving the html address of particular page can do this.
4. Find the relation between those communication components that builds the recurrent events. Writing transcripts of page that has been observed can do this.
5. Conduct virtual interviews on chosen member community.

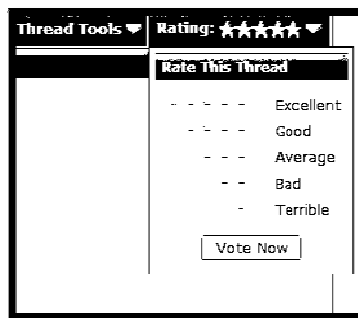
## RESULTS

Kaskus is an Indonesian based Internet forum that divide its website into two categories. The first category is trading forum and the other category is discussion forum. The word Kaskus itself is an abbreviation of *Kasak-Kusuk*. In English this word stands for buzz in term of word of mouth. Indonesian dictionary (Indonesian education department, 2008) defined *Kasak-Kusuk* has a sense of influencing other people surreptitiously with a specific purpose (typically delivered by whispering). This research found that Kaskus members consider Kaskus as a place where they can make a buzz with wide range of topics in it. Based on Alexa report (2011), Kaskus members came from variety of background such as age, occupation, gender and so on. Furthermore, Kaskuser (term for someone who is a member of Kaskus) have the capability to access and assess various information that they consider important or interesting for them.

Giving freedom to speak and think to all kaskuser is kaskus's commitment to their discussion forum. The word "freedom of speech" was put on every Kaskus major page, because they believe that freedom of speech is fundamental for human rights. This situation stimulates member to create outspoken discussion. By having the ability to express their ideas, perceptions and opinions about everything, Internet forum serves as media catharsis for users, especially when individual used to live in a non-democratic environment when they used to oppress or bury their opinion because of authoritarian environment. It is a common knowledge, that authoritarian environment does not value the freedom of speech. Minimizing differences in opinion is important in favor of the ruling group. Authoritarian environment can exist in any social setting such as organization, work place, and family even in a classroom. And not being able to express individual opinion continuously is a frustrated situation. Internet forum is present in society as an alternative to deal with those kind of frustrated situations faced by people on their daily activity since they can release their anger or their opinion in an Internet forum freely. According to catharsis hypothesis, acting aggressively or even viewing aggression is an effective way of reduce anger and aggressive feelings. Moreover, releasing anger and aggressive feelings is healthy, constructive and relaxing, whereas restraining it creates internal tension that is unhealthy (Bushman, Baumeister & Stack, 1999).

This study also discovered that kaskusers have tendency to use kaskus as their reference before they make any decision about particular topic or situation. It is found that Kaskusers use kaskus to solve problems they encountered in life including political decision. This finding supports Stewart's (A Mac Guru) proposition on his video interview (2008) that nowadays, with the existence of Internet forum, individual would be easier to resolve day-to-day problems by finding the right forum to find potential solutions from other people experiences.

In grading information's credibility, Kaskus enforces a specific system. Every Kaskuser has the ability to rank the credibility of a thread. The higher the credibility the more kaskuser will use it as their reference. The merit of a thread is described in the selection of stars ranging from one star to five stars, as shown on the picture below.



Picture 1. Thread credibility's tool

Kaskus also applies a class system to its members. The more members post a thread on kaskus forum, the higher the class of a member. In addition, kaskuser who already post more than 2000 posts have the authority to give other kaskusers a reputation point. Generally, kaskusers will be considered as reputable and credible if they get good reputation point (GRP) from other kaskusers. Moreover, kaskusers will get bad reputation point (BRP) if other kaskusers considered their interactions on kaskus unacceptable. For example, when they post a hoax, give a poor reply, violate or discriminate others' opinions, using discriminated words, and so forth. The better the reputation, the more kaskuser believed in what they say and claim on kaskus. It is shown that even in virtual world, speakers' reputation and credibility will serve as audience consideration in judging the information quality. On rhetorical study, speaker's credibility is known as Ethos. The legendary guru of Rhetoric, Aristotle introduced three major factors that a speaker needs to exhibit; Ethos, Pathos and Logos (367 BC/2007). In order to judge about particular information, one can rely on the speakers' reputation (Ethos), the way the speakers use emotion to deliver his message (Pathos) and the logic that being used by the speakers (Logos).



In addition, as one of the kaskusers, the researcher actively participates on a forum discussion, reads and posts diverse types of thread. The researcher posts a thread concerning what kaskusers think about kaskus existence and how do Kaskus affect them. 400 replies were posted to discuss this thread. From this thread, it is learned that Kaskus influence members' mindset regarding many topics. Some members explained, after they actively involved in "heart to heart" forum (forum on Kaskus that discuss about life problem), they know better how to deal with their problems and feelings in live. Other kaskuser added, being kaskuser helps him to know others' perspectives in live and learn to appreciate it. The kaskuser even attracts to something new because it was discuss on Kaskus. Kaskus introduce them with many new things or information that sometimes would not be available in their real world. In this sense, Kaskus fulfill individual need in relating with other people in order to have simulation in life such as learn different perspectives, beliefs, hobbies, religion, culture and so forth. As argued by Devito (2007, p. 7), to learn is one of the purposes individual doing interpersonal communication. It is also found out that feeling connected among kaskusers made them consider kaskus as a home for one big family. This feeling of kinship fosters a sense of comfort for member to involve actively on Kaskus' discussion. This sense of comfort generates individual trust on Kaskus forum. And the more we put our trust the more we are willing to disclose ourselves.

There are three major thread on kaskus; Social thread, Informative thread and Provocative thread. Social thread covers various social issues from their daily experience until the popular one on the mainstream mass media. Very often, kaskusers' discussion on this forum resulted in fundraising activity. This finding is in line with the result of Wellman and Gulia's research about voluntary group (cited in Livingstone & Lievrow, 2007, p. 47). Wellman and Gulia argued that virtual community have tendency to support social issues even if they are not designed for it. Social issues are considered as something people should cared for. Kaskusers considered Kaskus as a platform that has the ability to accommodate their need to get involved on social issues.

Observation shown Kaskuser itself pioneered numerous numbers of fundraising activities that occurred on Kaskus. Usually, it starts from a kaskuser who shared his or her experience or any information about a specific individual circumstance by posting a thread on Kaskus, which affected other kaskusers. Then from other Kaskusers' responses they will make an agreement on fundraising. For example, fundraising for rickshaw driver came from a kaskuser who told his experience meeting an old man who got his rickshaw stolen. Not only giving specific detail about the events but he also included pictures and video when he met the old man. On Aristotle's rhetoric, this method belongs to Pathos that already explained above. Then, the discussion getting deeper along with many replies from other Kaskusers who want to know more about the issue. In general, Kaskuser felt sorry and anger about the situation. Then, some Kaskusers present ideas to rise funding for the old man. In less than 24 hours, funds had successfully collected.

From this research, it is revealed that Kaskus has cognitive, affective and behavior effects to its members. Stif and Mongeau (2003, p. 304) considered those three effects as a result from communication action. Cognitive effect refers to any changes of what is known, understood and perceived by audiences. This effect related to knowledge and information transmission. Most of the kaskuser revealed that they use Kaskus as a media to explore a wide range of specific information and the latest one. In contrast to conventional mass media like television and newspapers, each Kaskuser can express their views on certain issues freely. Therefore, it is also more likely to make Kaskuser knowledgeable as they could see an issue from various viewpoints. Moreover, all Kaskusers' experienced cognitive effect either when they actively involved on a discussion or when they only have a glance on a particular topic.

Affective effect refers to any changes of what is felt, loved or hated by audiences. This effect is associated with emotions, attitudes, or values. Some Kaskusers claim they feel emotion or attitude change since joining Kaskus forum. Behavioral effects refer to any changes of real behavior that can be observed; which includes the patterns of action, activity, or habit. The above findings explain how Kaskus as a forum in cyberspace affects its members in certain issues and work as word of mouth. This effect is of course different among members.

As it explained before, Kaskus has proved to become individuals' reference group in assessing themselves and shaping their attitudes towards particular topics or situation. Some Kaskuser even mentioned that they would try to find information on Kaskus regarding any circumstances that they are dealing before they made a decision including political decision. The ability to speak freely increases individual comfort in using one media. This condition provokes high satisfaction from communication actors. In addition, the more we satisfied, the more we put our trust in it. By having those characteristics, Internet forum became a powerful word of mouth phenomenon in society, nowadays.

## CONCLUSION

Communication is center in our life. It is intertwined in every aspect of human life. Therefore with the advance of communication technologies, we will face revolution in how we communicate with others. In the past, there are two basic division of communication channel: interpersonal channel which involve all kind of face to face channel versus mass media channel which involve radio, television, newspaper and all kind of media that have capacity to distribute its message to mass audience. The coming of the Internet alters the distinctions. Internet possesses revolutionary functions of communication channel. It merges all type of communication channel both interpersonal and mass media channel.

Nowadays, the rise of user generated content in Internet such as social media gives rise to social media as the new word of mouth. By possessing the capacity of mass communication and the power of interpersonal communication's influence; new media become the most powerful tools in constructing public opinion. Not only it works as communication platform, but new media with the user-generated content also works as media catharsis, which allows individual to express their idea and opinion freely. In conclusion, interpersonal communication serves as mediator for mass media to produce a great effect. This phenomenon best described with the emergence effect of social media.

Moreover, in cyberspace, in order to judge the credibility of information, individuals still relied on three major factors on persuasion that was introduced by Aristotle; Ethos (the way the speaker character perceived by the audiences), Pathos (the way the speaker use emotion to deliver his message) and Logos (the logic that being used by the speaker). There are three effects that happens as a result of communication action; cognitive, affective, behavior. And there is no communication situation that does not demand changes on its audiences whereas it is cognitive, affective or behavior. Additionally, the ultimate effects that indicate whether the speaker delivered a message effectively are behavior effect.

Felling connected also a factor that generates disclosure on virtual world. On kaskus, the feeling of kinship among members fosters a sense of comfort for member to involve actively on Kaskus' discussion. This sense of comfort resulted on individual trust on Kaskus forum. And the more we put our trust the more we willing to disclose ourselves. This condition provokes high satisfaction from communication actors, especially in mediating their tension release since they can disclose their anger or their opinion about everything freely. Internet forum provokes the new public sphere for community where they can learn, think and act more liberally. By having those characteristics, Internet forum became a powerful word of mouth phenomenon in society, nowadays. Kaskus has proved to become individuals' reference group in assessing themselves and shaping their attitudes towards particular topics or situation.



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