Identity and Interaction, A Glimpse into Persib WhatsApp Group

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Abstract: *Persib Bandung, an Indonesian professional football club, is the place where several identities are encountered. The specific place discussed in this article is a virtual place namely WhatsApp group. This research illustrates the form of virtual interaction among the players and managers. The interaction form is connected with the identity markers of the players. To illustrate the form of interaction in Persib's WhatsApp group, I interviewed Persib's social media manager. The aim of the questions is to uncover the activities inside the group. It makes this is a qualitative research. From the interview session, the data in the form of narration are discussed with the theory of identity, interaction, and social to find a meaning behind player's responses towards messages from managers. As a result, Persib's WhatsApp group is designed as a medium where the instructions are given. It shows that players' understanding is influenced by their identity. The article finds the identity markers like age, race and experience enables the players to be more active in the group. However, identity markers like performance, which is seen as a salient aspect in football, do not guarantee the players to be more engaging in WhatsApp group.*

Keywords: *Identity, Football, WhatsApp, Interaction, Social Media*

INTRODUCTION

Persib Bandung is one of the Indonesian professional football clubs located in Bandung, West Java. Being one of the most successful football clubs in Indonesia, it attracts international and national players to join and play for Persib. The international and local players not only meet and communicate in real life but also in a virtual place. Persib social media manager confirms they use WhatsApp group to organize the players. WhatsApp group is one of the features of WhatsApp where up to 250 people can gather and interact as a community. The persib social manager also stated that not every player participates actively in WhatsApp group. In addition to that, the board mentioned this issue usually occurs due to the language barrier and personality traits of the players. To give more details about WhatsApp, Herring (2004) argues that WhatsApp conversations are text-based interactions that rely on a keyboard to write the messages and a screen on which to read them, in addition to the use of online interaction symbols. Also, WhatsApp is categorized into synchronous, a same time information exchange (Maryani; 2006: 96). Myers and Anderson (2008) believed that group members are interdependent and coordinate their efforts to accomplish a common task which is the purpose of the group's existence. In Persib, the common task is to be the champion and it is the manager and players' job to make sure it happens

despite all of the obstacles including the communication and interaction issues among the players. The interaction itself is seen from the way they communicate with each other in WhatsApp group. The form of interaction is usually surrounded by norms. Feldman (1984) argues that a group norm is seen as a rule that groups adopt to control member's activities. It is because a task norm allows the group to work toward task accomplishment, procedural norms draws the procedures the group will follow, and a social norm defines how group members engage in the communication (Myers & Anderson, 2008).

This article illustrates how the identity of players and manager shape the interaction in WhatsApp group of Persib Bandung season 2019/2020. To illustrate it the identity markers become significant in this research and need to point out. Markers of identity such as gender, race, ethnicity and age are strongly evident in virtual worlds (Thomas, 2007:6). Previously, an article from FourFourTwo Magazine entitled *How WhatsApp Change Football* described the new trends among football players in Europe. The article points out that WhatsApp becomes a noisy place for football players and often causes misunderstanding between teammates because their perception is cultural bias. Assuming that situation happens vastly in football, Persib with its diverse culture inside experiences a similar situation. Quoting Gruhl, Gritsenko (2016: 17) believe online community members tend to form shared identities and coverage in discussing topics of common interest. When the member of the group interact, the identity and cultural background affect the understandings when the massage is received. As Ungureanu and Corina (1: 2013) state people make sense of representations in different ways according to their understanding of values and assumptions. Mulyana (2004:

351) outlines every communication practice essentially represents culture. In addition, Khotimah (2000: 49) argues that everybody has a different image toward the surrounding reality. Thus, although the main discussion in the WhatsApp group is about football, the understanding and response among players may be different. It leads to what Lemos (2008; 96) states that the connecting place physical and electronic place becomes more complex because this territory is now related with laws, regulations, subjectivities, cultures, and politics. in other words, besides illustrating the interaction pattern of football players in virtual space, this research also tries to seek the most expressive identity markers in shaping the interaction in a multi-cultured-sport community like Persib Bandung.

METHOD

This section outlines the methodology applied in this research. It involves describing the participants which are players and manager, research design, and the way the data is analyzed. The research started with the perception towards the football players' lifestyle especially the way they communicate in a sport community. It has been highlighted by the media and to verify the phenomenon, I met Persib officials to do some interview. The data gathered from the interview was matched with the second short interviews with former Indonesian football manager Simon McMennemy on a *zoom* meeting. He confirmed that most players rely on their mobile phones to interact. He added that mobile app such as WhatsApp helps to enhance the communication process but real-life communication is more important in building interaction between players. The statements connote that virtual interaction may cause misunderstandings between players. Therefore, from the data, I traced the way Persib's player communicate

and marked some potential conflict that related to by identity issue.

Data and Participant

The data obtained for this article included 27 players from the official Whatsapp group Persib, involving international and local players and international managers. They are senior and junior players of the Persib's first squad 2018/2019. The senior is meant by the older players and the most experienced players in Persib. On the other hand, the junior players are younger player with maximum 22 years old. Supardi (36) is the captain and local player. Management, staff and assistant manager also exist and contribute in WhatsApp group e.g. Yudiana (47) and Budi Bram. Table 1 provides the detail of player's identity, it comes from the official web of Persib Bandung and is confirmed by the interview session with the management.

Other aspects that contribute in constructing the player's identity are their performance and the atmosphere of Persib itself. As Hall & Gay (2003: 4) stated "identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion." In 2018/2019 season of *Liga 1*, Persib finished at 6 at the table. Considering their target is inside the big five, the 2018/2019 season was not impressive for Persib. Despite there are plenty of components in football statistics, goals for (GF), goals against (GA) and assist can tell a lot on how the players and managers performed in one season. Some players become the highlight in 2019/2019 for Persib. Febri Hariyadi (23) is a local midfielder. He

successfully bagged 9 goals that season, considered as the most impressive player by football pundits. His teammate, Ezechiel (31), also bagged 9 goals that season, but it was less than average since he is a striker. Meanwhile, Febri Hariadi (23) also provided excellent support from his position with 4 assists followed by Ardi Idrus (26) with the same number of assists. Overall, Persib successfully netted 49 goals and conceded 39 goals that season. Thus, several local media, namely *Tribun*, *goal.com*, *Tempo*, and *Viva* argued that Persib was lucky to have Robert Rene Alberts as manager, otherwise the season might even get worse. In short, Persib in 2018/2019 didn't perform really well and failed to achieve the target.

Research Design

In this study, I examined how members of WhatsApp group of Persib Bandung, a professional football club from Indonesia, interact with each other. The interest comes from a how multi-cultural group of players, with the same status as professional football players, communicate and understand messages in a virtual place. However, due to strict policy from Persib management, the access to WhatsApp group is off-limits. Therefore, I interviewed the social media manager of Persib Bandung, Yudiana (47) and Budi Bram, The Head of Organizing Committee of Persib Bandung. In the interview session, both of them were asked about the activity in the official WhatsApp group of Persib Bandung. The aim of this interview is to describe how identity influences the way they interact in the virtual world. Thus, the question is designed to give an illustration of what happened inside WhatsApp group Persib.

This study relies on Bailey's methods of social research (1982). According to him, this is acategorized as a descriptive study as an attempt to describe phenomena in detail or to describe what

TABLE 1: Official Persib Players and Managers Persib 2018/2019

Players' Name	Nationality	Age
M. Natshir	Indonesia	26
Aqil Savik	Indonesia	20
I Made W	Indonesia	38
Dhika B.	Indonesia	28
Henhen H.	Indonesia	24
Indra Mustafa	Indonesia	20
Supardi (C)	Indonesia	36
Ardi Idrus	Indonesia	26
Zalnando	Indonesia	23
Jufriyanto	Indonesia	32
Kuipers	Netherlands	27
Dedi K.	Indonesia	28
Febri Hariyadi	Indonesia	23
Hariono	Indonesia	34
Ghozali S.	Indonesia	27
Kim Kurniawan	Indonesia/Germany	29
B. Nugraha	Indonesia	18
Syafril	Indonesia	19
Abdul Aziz	Indonesia	25
Erwin	Indonesia	26
Vizcarra	Indonesia (Naturalized)	33
Gian Zola	Indonesia	21
Nazari	Philippines	28
N. Ezechiel	Chad	31
Frets Butuan	Indonesia	23
Kippersluis	Netherlands	26
Omskarba	Indonesia	21
Robert Rene Alberts (M)	Netherlands	65

(Research Data)

happened, in this case what happened in WhatsApp group Persib (1982:38). As an attempt, the interview is organized with a close-ended question system. The result of the interview session is recorded and transcribed, resulting in 3 pages of transcript. The questions are mainly focused on how the players communicate with the members of the groups, and what purpose of the group. All questions had been answered with addition of spontaneous responses. The answers from both informants are the fundamental sources to study the connection between identities and interaction patterns in a virtual world. All the answers are analyzed and discussed with the help of previous similar studies and theories in the next chapter.

I encountered some obstacles in collecting the data. Persib's WhatsApp group is limited to outsiders. The policy is completely reasonable. As a result of heavy competition, Persib doesn't want to jeopardize their data to be public. Therefore, I conduct an interview with

Yudiana (47), a social media manager of Persib, and Budi Bram, Match Organizing Committee. The two of them are significant figures, very close to the players and managers, and members of the official WhatsApp group of Persib Bandung. The question is mostly about the interaction pattern that happened inside WhatsApp group. The questions like *who are the most talkative members?*; *What football topic is mostly discussed?*; *Do the players fully engage in a conversation?* are consistently asked while interviewing. The result will be in greater detail in the next chapter. it enables me to illustrate the interaction that take place in WhatsApp group. However, due to the limitation of data, observing messages directly cannot be practiced. Thus I can only discuss the interaction in general i.e. daily interaction of players. on the other hand, the official website of Persib Bandung provides some additional data. The players and managers attribute displayed on the website. I can easily spot the best player from the particular season, the youngest, the oldest, the captain, the injured player and their nationality. This data from the interview and the website is considered as identity, the identity that decides their role in WhatsApp group when the actual interaction happens and how they interpret it. As Hall, et. al. (1980: 126) state as "*self-identity is cultural identity; claims to individual difference depend on the audience appreciation, on shared performing and narrative rules.*" In short, role and identity have strong connection and they contribute to shaping one pattern of interaction in a virtual place without relinquishing any narrative rules.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Being a football fan, judging the team performance after a match is inevitable. The opinion may vary from appreciation to critic. A topic is that often underlined is the communication issue between players in or off the field. Having an up and down season, Persib's performance a few years back is associated with a communication issue. The issue itself is confirmed by sport journalists and pundit that can be found in online videos and articles. Considering that the issue is linked with the combination of national and international players, this section presents the breakdown of Persib squad in the a2018/2019 season. The aim is to present that Persib is a multi-cultured place and how identity marks can be a vital part in building communication among players.

From the data, Persib has 27 players in the senior squad. The data show that Persib senior squad compete in 2018/2019 season and they failed to reach the target. Also, the data shows the composition of the team based on nationality, from its squad, 21 players or 78% are local players. 4 players or 15% are international players (2 Dutch, 1 Filipino, and from Chad). The rest, 2 players, is players who have double nationalities. On the other side, based on the age of players, the average age in the first squad of Persib Bandung is 26 years old. B. Nugraha is the youngest player, while I Made W, 38 years old, is the oldest player to play for Persib. Persib is dominated by local players. The captain is local players. Since the average age of the players is 26 years old, they are in their prime condition to play football and have similar shared experiences. Therefore, having a decent squad yet struggling in the table may actually hurt them. However, this unsuccessful attempt to win the league doesn't affect the communication inside Persib's WhatsApp Group.

In the language aspect, although more than 70% of players are local players, they use English to communicate in WhatsApp group. This happens because the managers, one of the most influential and important figure, Robert Rene Alberts (65) has difficulties in

speaking Bahasa Indonesia. Also, first-choice players like Ezechiel, Kippersluis, and Kim Kurniawan can't fluently speak Bahasa Indonesia. English is chosen to connect players to players and players to managers. The reason is it's the most common language practiced. Another reason, even though most local players are not fluent in speaking English, they still are able to understand the instruction because a lot of terms in football are in English. In addition, WhatsApp offers help to players who don't understand spoken English by giving them a chance to read and understand the text first. In the other words, the purpose of Persib WhatsApp is to discuss football and players understand it. The first explanation is the group of multi-cultural members with different identities easily understand messages and instruction because they are already familiar with the topic which is football. The second one, the managers understand English very well, so he can communicate with everyone. The last one, terms and lexicon in football e.g. *corner kick*, *free-kick*, *throw-in*, *midfielder* and *offside* are widely spoken and written in English.

Activities in Persib's Official WhatsApp Group

From the interview session, I can illustrate the activity that happened in Persib's WhatsApp group. It begins with how players got an invitation. Players will automatically be invited to the group if they are officially joined Persib Bandung and signed the contract. The manager, captain and coach have already joined the group and welcome the players. They show the same gesture to both local and international players. In total, there are approximately 30 members with the combination of 27 players and the rest is managerial figures. Like Lemos (2008) states about the connection between reality and the virtual world, there are rules in the virtual world just like

reality. Persib official WhatsApp group is the virtual group dedicated to sharing football related ideas among players and managers. In this WhatsApp group, managers set the rules, and the players must obey them, so it becomes a norm. In general WhatsApp group members interact with sharing messages contain news, images, videos, voice notes, and even jokes inside WhatsApp group.

Through WhatsApp group, managers have control over the players. The players are aware that there are being controlled. According to Waycott, (2017: 13) the sense of being observed is an ever-present mediating force that impacts on people construct and perform their identities online. Waycott implies that when interacting on an online platform like WhatsApp group, the members of the group understand that there are certain rules that must be followed and it impacts the shape of interaction and understanding the message text. The text messages themselves contain notifications of the training schedule, training menu, and match fixtures. They communicate using English as their primary language. Players like I Made Wirawan (38) and Kim Kurniawan are bilingual. They can help interpret to young players what the managers have said. Also the assistant manager, Budiman (48) helps to translate and explain the instructions to younger players and players who don't speak English fluently. This approach is found effective to clear up the language barrier in Persib's WhatsApp group. With that help, players are requested to understand every information, instruction and strategy coming from the manager. This behavior is a result of the assumption that the group belongs to everyone who understands the instruction, in order to make every player feel the same way, senior players try to help them. In preference of Huffaker, 2011 that members identify belonging to a certain group by using shared language

and talking about items using the same language.

Managers share information in WhatsApp group. The information contains match tapes and profiles of the next opponents. The players then analyze it and begin the discussion. The discussion aims to spot any weaknesses and gain advantages for the next match. The WhatsApp group is formal and only cover football topic. The peak of interaction happens before and after the match. Then, After the season finished, usually the managers don't control the player through the WhatsApp group. The managers just wait until the players get back from holiday. During the season, if the players don't get a call for the next match, managers still ask them to keep in touch with the squad in WhatsApp group. The players who sit in their home usually just send messages containing encouragement like *good luck*!, or *selamat bertanding dan semoga dapat 3 poin ya*. While the WhasApp group is formal and the topic is about football, players send messages outside the topic on a particular occasion. Marriage, death, engagement and the birth of children spark communication inside the group. Jokes and humor also are accepted by the members of the group.

Inside the WhatsApp group, players get the match taping and they can watch their performance. The manager sends the messages containing critiques and compliments. However, managers mostly send messages containing evaluations from the finished game. He points both major and minor mistakes. The players should understand their mistakes and try to not repeat the mistakes for the next match. Every report about a player's performance is shared in WhatsApp group. If players perform under the expectation and continuous for several games, the manager will not point it out in WhatsApp group, instead the managers will call the

players and have more private face to face conversation. Robert Rene Alberts understands the timing of discussing matters in or out of the WhatsApp group In the other words WhatsApp group plays a major part in modern football, especially in Persib. Review, evaluation, scheduling are done and shared through WhatsApp group. Although the squad is multi-cultured, they can understand and have to understand the topic.

Interaction and Identity in Persib's WhatsApp Group

Players respond to the messages from the manager with various responses. The response includes confirmation, negation, and interrogation. Some players choose to remain silent, usually this behavior is shown by young players. Young players, even though they play in the senior squad, they still feel uncomfortable to respond because they feel the WhatsApp group conversation belongs to the older and more experienced players. Washington & Karen (2001: 8) point this as *just as individuals struggle to enhance their personal status/distinction within their sport and community, they also struggle to enhance their sport's status in the larger community and society*. Also, most of the young players are not fluent in English. It makes them not confident to give response. If they must respond, the responses are very limited to only one or two words like *yes*, *ok*, and *thank you*. The managers and older players aware of this condition and they don't put too much pressure on young players to be more active in WhatsApp group. It shows that the manager tries to keep positive atmosphere in WhatsApp group. He believes the players respect him even though the response is very minimum.

As I mentioned before, young players feel that WhastApp group conversation belongs to the older players. The older and more experienced players

respond to the manager's instruction frequently. However, there are among old and experienced players who happen to be more active than others. I Made Wirawan (38) and Hariono (34) are senior local players and have been playing for Persib Bandung since 2008 and 2012. Having loyal to a club for 5 to 10 years means something to fans and teammates. They get the respect they deserve and able to speak more often in WhatsApp group. Active in WhatsApp group for these players means they are active and give fast response to answer manager's instruction in WhatsApp group. Not only that, they can throw questions and have a further discussion. They don't start a discussion but always ready to answer and discuss football matters.

Kim Kurniawan (29),a player with dual nationality, and Ezechiel (31), an international player, respond to the manager's instructions in WhatsApp group. They are one of the most important players in the squad. Kim Kurniawan (29) came from German and already familiar with multi-cultured groups, and Ezechiel (31) is from Chad. When they arrived at Persib Bandung fans, managers, and players put their hope to them because international players mean they have played in the higher level of football and Persib Bandung respects it. Both of them can communicate in English well. Therefore, they are easy to communicate in WhatsApp group and fully understand what happens in WhatsApp group. However, the pattern is the same with experienced local players. They don't start a discussion, they wait for the managers to open the conversation and then they join it. Uniquely, significant international players like Ezechiel (31) can make fun of and bully young players like Beckham Nugraha (18). The manager allows it and sees it as an amusing interaction and keeps the atmosphere of the group alive and loose.

In this case, WhatsApp as a place becomes crucial. Reality has a connection with virtual places. The WhasApp group as a virtual place adopts reality in the terms of value, control and boundary. As Lemos (2008) stated that there aren't any differences between reality and the virtual world. Ezechiel (31), Kim Kurniawan (29), I Made Wirawan (38), and Hariono (34) are the epitome of the most influential Persib's players that season. They have more value, they control the match, they set the higher bar and they get the respect that they deserve. It gives them the identity of the dominant players on and off the pitch. It affects the way they interact inside WhatsApp group and probably as what happened outside the WhatssApp group. This argument is supported by Delaney (2005), who stated "*we must not see territory as 'natural' but as a cultural artifact, a social product linked to desire, power and identity.*" As correlation to the statement, some dominant players have the power to dominate the conversation in WhatsApp group yet never start a conversation but reply to the manager's instructions. The power is a product of the higher performance and longer experience in football pitch. Contrastingly, the young and inexperienced players tend to be silent members due to the language barrier or as Prasanti & Indriani. 2019:184 mentioned as the main obstacles for professionals while interacting in online groups are ineffectiveness and lack of skills i.e. language skills.

Even though, only dominant players have access to interact in WhatsApp group broadly, The WhatsApp group has a warm atmosphere. All of the players feel the warmth inside WhatsApp group. Back to the main purpose of WhatsApp group, the intention is to create a place where players can interact with other players and managers without the limitation of time and place. Thus, player-

player and player-manager interaction can happen effectively. on the other hand, reality gives a great influence to the virtual world. The certain atmosphere inside Persib's WhatsApp group is a reflection of the atmosphere in the daily life of Persib players. Lemos (2008) argues "*electronic relationships can reinforce communities and the community meaning of place.*" McMenemy (47) the Scottish former Indonesia head coach, on an online interview on 22nd April 2020, was asked about the social media usage among the players. He answered that he doesn't like the players communicate on social media including WhatsApp way often. He likes the players to build communication and interaction in reality. Therefore, stronger interaction and a sense of belonging for the team will reflect on WhatsApp group. In short, WhastApp group is an artifact that boosts player identity so it can be seen clearly while interacting inside WhatsApp group. While only some players respond actively in WhatsApp group, WhatsApp group also strengthens the connection between players. This the result of the manager that keeps the atmosphere inside it respectful and warm as in reality.

CONCLUSION

Persib's WhatsApp group is created as information sharing media. Managers and first team players are the members of the group. The manager shares the information and instruction related to football. The shared information is equivalent to instructions. The instructions may vary from individual instruction or team instruction. The manager expects the players to give full attention to the video and learn it. Even though only some players respond to the instruction directly, the manager demands a full understanding of the instruction. In the other words, in the terms of daily activity and performance, the manager uses WhatsApp groups daily to organize the

players for better collective performance.

In identity-interaction terms, the multi-cultured players give various responses to the instruction. The players usually responses with a confirmation or as a silent reader. Players that show an expected performance, will be considered as successfully understanding the instruction. The behavior of responding to the manager's instruction is influenced by player's identity. Previously, I assumed player's identity is constructed at the same time as they interact in WhastApp group, yet the identity is represented from the real world and it influences the way they interact. Therefore, it is in line with Locher (2010) argument that online communication is as authentic as offline interaction. The player's identity associates with their origin, fan's expectation, performance on the pitch, and experience. The discussion shows the identity of players determines the frequency of responding in WhatsApp group. Players who fluent in English usually give respond to the manager's instructions because they understand the demands. At the same time, higher fan's expectation of international players boosts their confidence to respond to the instructions. Therefore, players with higher confidence often respond to manager instruction.

Players with excellent statistics like a number of goals and assists are personified as important players. Those statistics the evidence of understanding the instruction. Experience plays a major part in the behavior of responding to the instruction. In Persib WhatsApp group, players with the most experience are the most active member of the group. While some local players suffer inconsistent performance and choose to be quiet, the more experienced players respond actively in WhatsApp group regardless of their performance. The opposite happens to young players. For example, Febri

Hariayadi (23) has been incredible for the team. However, he is still reluctant to give responses to the instructions. This behavior from young players has correlation from the identities. They see themselves as individual who isn't comfortable expressing ideas among experienced players. It can be concluded that in the sports field, especially football, great performance doesn't guarantee players to be more engaged in the communication process. It is seen as certain players understand the instructions from WhatsApp group. The article finds that identity markers like spoken language and experience are the key factors for players to be more engaged in the communication process. For future research, these findings may contribute more to sport management to shape effective communication in sports teams.

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