Virtual Public Sphere On Social Media (Habermas' Critical Study Of The Digital Hoax Phenomenon Whatsaap Group Alumni Iluni Menwa UI)

Rr Dinar Soelistyowati[1]*, Arief Subhan[2], Ridzki Rinanto Sigit[3]

[1] Universitas Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya dan Universitas Sahid Jakarta, Indonesia
[2] UIN Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia
[3] Universitas Sahid Jakarta, Indonesia
*Corresponding Author:
Email : dinar.soelistyowati@dsn.ubharajaya.ac.id

***Abstract**.*

The present study aims to examine the phenomenon of the Virtual Public Sphere on social media, specifically focusing on the impact of digital hoaxes within the ILUNI Menwa UI Alumni WhatsApp Group. In the contemporary era of digital information, the proliferation of digital hoaxes, particularly those about the COVID-19 pandemic, has emerged as a noteworthy concern, exerting a discernible influence on public discourse. The primary objective of this study is to examine the effects of digital hoaxes on the Virtual Public Sphere. This research addresses a significant vacuum in the existing literature by integrating three critical theoretical frameworks: New Media Theory, Network Wealth Theory, and Jürgen Habermas' Concept of Virtual Public Spheres. The research inquiry examines the influence of digital hoaxes on communication and social interaction within the Virtual Public Sphere on WhatsApp and their potential ramifications on social integration within virtual groups. The existing body of research exhibits a notable deficiency in comprehending the significance of WhatsApp as a widely utilised social media platform within social communication, particularly regarding the potential risks associated with disseminating digital hoaxes. The research employed a qualitative methodology, specifically in-depth interviews with 30 ILUNI Menwa UI Alumni WhatsApp Group participants. In addition, a content analysis was conducted on the messages inside the group to gain insight into the impact of digital hoaxes on communication dynamics. The study's results indicate that digital hoaxes can impede logical discourse, generate disputes in information, and potentially undermine the integrity of communication on the WhatsApp platform. This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the function of social media, specifically WhatsApp, in forming a Virtual Public Sphere. It also examines the potential consequences of digital hoaxes on social integration within virtual communities during the COVID-19 epidemic.

Keywords: Digital hoax, new media and public sphere.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a real fact that communication today has become the key to the development of all areas of life. The development of communication technology has brought the world to contemporary changes today and become a determinant of global change [1]. *Global Village* as a condition that McLuhan said became real and proven by looking at the current state of communication [2]. One of the striking and interesting phenomena in the development of media culture is the presence of social media which in its own way has created a new public sphere. The concept of the public sphere itself appeared in thought by Jürgen Habermas. In short, Habermas defines the public sphere as space, where this space has easy access, free from all pressures both government and economy. In the context of the public sphere, citizens have the freedom to interact and express opinions to reach a common understanding [3]. For Habermas, there are 2 important elements as a buffer for society, namely the system and the world of life where the system is driven by rationality and life is driven by communication, consensus and agreement. In the public sphere of private persons, the use of reason, need articulation and public opinion are the main pillars [4].The presence of a new form of public sphere and present in the form of social media platforms, it turns out that in addition to providing new hope for the wider public sphere but also bringing threats to the existence of public space.

Public space which was originally expected to be a place of interaction, discussion, argumentation for an understanding and mutual change, is often used as a means of spreading hatred, fake news, slander and provocation which in social media terminology is referred to as hoaxes including in social media WhatsApps Group.Hoaxes are fabricated information, fake news, or facts that have been distorted or fabricated to appear

serious (political). Hoax (acronym: practical joke, joke, hoax) is used to refer to jokes, lies, mischief, pranks, lies, cheats and tricks [5]. Currently, the spread of fake news / information (hoax) is increasingly rife. The most common way of spreading hoaxes is through social media. In Indonesia, the hoax phenomenon raises doubts about the information received and confuses the public. It is a technique used by irresponsible parties to sow discord and hatred [6].Related to the explanation of hoaxes through social media, especially whatsapp, the researcher will explain its relevance to the research conducted by the researcher, starting with an explanation of the Student Regiment (abbreviated Menwa) is one of the civil forces trained and prepared to defend the Republic of Indonesia as the embodiment of the Universal People's Defense and Security System (Sishankamrata). Menwa UI Command Headquarters (abbreviated as Mako) is located at the UI Campus in Depok. On campus, Menwa is given different authority and responsibility from other SMEs and is directly under the rectorate.

As a component of state defense, it is tasked with planning, preparing and compiling all potential students in each level I regional province, to carry out functions as a state reserve component. Menwa as a component of community protection is tasked with planning, preparing and compiling all the potential of students in each level I regional province, to carry out functions as linmas. There are examples of Menwa from other campuses, one of the components of defending the country by bravely warding off hoaxes through seminar activities [7]. One of the responsibilities associated with safeguarding the nation involves mitigating hoaxes or misinformation. The spread of hoaxes or fake news can have a very broad detrimental impact on the stability and security of the state and society. Therefore, the state is obliged to protect its citizens from the dissemination of inaccurate or deceptive information that may have adverse consequences.As one of the trusted universities in Asia and included in one of the world class universities, UI has succeeded in proving itself capable of meeting the necessary requirements in order to be called an international-minded campus where one of the requirements is to maintain the quality of education and teaching. As one of the academic (educated) people, Iluni Menwa UI is also expected to help in controlling the spread of hoaxes. This is considering that the phenomenon of spreading hoaxes has become an issue of shared responsibility between the government and all levels of society (Solihin, 2021).

The University of Indonesia Alumni Association as the Student Regiment Commissariat is the official forum for Menwa UI alumni under the auspices of Iluni UI which has 342 deliberative participants during the election of the Chairman of Iluni Menwa UI for the 2021-2023 period under lead of Kombes Pol Kasmen. All members are expected to be agents in controlling the spread of hoaxes. During his time as Menwa UI, all members underwent the main activities in the form of routine training, basic military education, and initiation. In these activities, character building briefing is also included. Character building is expected to tear down hoaxes.The idea put forward by Habermas about the existence of conventional public spaces, which include institutions such as cafes and newspapers, has been expanded to include the virtual domain. This phenomenon facilitates the formation of digital public spaces where individuals from various socio-cultural backgrounds can engage in discourse and develop perspectives. The novelty of the theory lies in the application of the concept of public space to the online environment, which facilitates global participation and interaction without being hindered by geographical boundaries.

II.   METHODS

This research uses qualitative methodology to comprehensively examine and assess the influence of digital hoaxes in Virtual Public Space on various social media platforms, focusing on the ILUNI Menwa UI Alumni WhatsApp Group. The selection of qualitative techniques is based on the objectives of the study, which is to gain a comprehensive understanding of this complicated phenomenon, investigate individual perspectives and encounters within groups, and test their social and communicative frameworks.Using qualitative methodology allowed researchers to conduct comprehensive interviews with 30 members of a WhatsApp Group. This technique facilitates the opportunity to listen attentively to their accounts, analyze their perspectives, and gain insight into the impact of digital hoaxes on the dynamics of communication and social interaction within the group.Through qualitative methodology, this study aims to offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the influence of digital hoaxes in the ILUNI Menwa UI

Alumni WhatsApp group. In addition, this research effort seeks to contribute to the existing knowledge surrounding Virtual Public Spaces during the contemporary social media era. The research in question uses a critical paradigm approach to examine power dynamics in relation to the spread of COVID-19 digital hoaxes through the Menwa UI Alumni WhatsApp group. Specifically, the study aimed to investigate how information manipulation impacts the beliefs and behaviors of group members.This study aims to analyze the content of messages sent in WhatsApp Groups to understand the context of communication in the group. The proposed methodology includes the collection of letters, identification of emerging themes, and further content analysis. This analysis will ascertain how digital hoaxes impact group conversations and social relationships.

The proposed methodology involves in-depth interviews and analysis of the content of messages to examine the collected data. This study will be conducted within the framework of Network Wealth Theory, and the Concept of Virtual Public Space, which was previously considered relevant to this study. This methodology will facilitate an understanding of the impact of digital hoaxes and the operational dynamics of the Habermas concept in the environment. Data triangulation will be used to improve the accuracy and validity of the findings. This will be achieved by comparing the data obtained from the interview and the analysis of the content of the message, to confirm the results. Thus, in qualitative research, researchers collect data primarily through interviews and observations, with documentation as an additional source of data.With ± 200 members, the WhatsApp Group facilitates various activities, including the exchange of personal experiences, dissemination of the latest information, and discussion of various topics, including matters concerning the Covid-19 pandemic. In many cases, fake news about the Covid-19 pandemic appears in group deliberations, including unverifiable or unverifiable information. Some members of the group are skeptical about hoax news, expressing the need for verification or more credible sources. Nevertheless, individuals in the group seem to hold those beliefs and disseminate information more widely.This study examines the use of secondary data derived from screenshots of Menwa UI WhatsApp Alumni groups to investigate the spread of misinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The screenshots provided include a collection of dialogues, correspondence, and interactions between group members on matters related to the Covid-19 pandemic, including deliberations to spread false information.

The subjects of this study were members of the virtual WAG Menwa UI Alumni community numbering ± 200 people with a minimum undergraduate education background who had a tendency to spread high hoaxes such as exposure to Wibowo et al. (2019), and have original thinking. According to the survey, those who live in urban areas and in Java and have easy and cheap internet access are more susceptible to hoaxes and other negative habits when digesting online news (Cahyadi, 2020). The age group over 35 years is considered more vulnerable to being perpetrators and recipients of fake news or hoaxes (Machmudi, 2020). In line with Ferdinandus Setu, Head of the Public Relations Bureau of Kominfo, when met by Liputan6.com, hoax spreaders cannot be young people; On the contrary, it is more likely to be an old person. For example, many moms do it through chat (chat feature). Without the need to read first, go straight forward. And in addition, the majority of hoax spreaders are over 45 years old. Older Facebook users are known to spread hoaxes more than twice as often as those between the ages of 45 and 65. Compared to the youngest age group (18-29 years), the difference can reach seven times (Orang Tua Lebih Sering Sebarkan Hoaks, 2019).The selection process of 30 participants from 238 larger individuals in the Menwa UI Alumni WhatsApp group can be influenced by various factors and related considerations. The concept of limited resources refers to conditions where the availability of resources is insufficient to meet the demands or desires of individuals. Collecting data from an entire population of 200 individuals may require a substantial allocation of time, effort, and resources. Utilizing a sample size of 30 participants allowed researchers to effectively reduce the burden and resource allocation associated with data collection and subsequent analysis.

III.   RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Virtual Community as Public Sphere and Digital Hoax Potential
The creation of virtual communities through internet technology applied in the form of social media, including WhatsApp, makes this virtual community a new form and digital form of what is often referred to

as the public sphere. Jürgen Habermas, German sociologist, father of the public sphere, through his book entitled TheStructural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, initially defined the public sphere as a forum for expressing opinions autonomously and openly so as to shape public opinion. Habermas's version of the Public Sphere has information accessibility, open and independent opinion as its trademark. For Habermas, the public sphere is the basic function of a democracy, so in principle the public sphere has the following basic principles [8]: a).The public sphere is freely accessible to the public and open to everyone, b).Have existential equality for all, c).The Public Sphere is open to all kinds of subjects and topics of discussion.d) The best arguments and opinions will be the result of discussion, e)The purpose of the public sphere is consensus and commitment.

In subsequent developments, this public sphere has an increasingly widespread meaning. The public sphere is not only understood as an arena or public space that allows people to meet face to face to discuss and debate. The presence of the internet and social media has brought the concept of the public sphere to the concept of the public sphere which is getting wider with the emergence of virtual communities. The Internet has changed the way modern society interacts and integrates. The integration of technology and communication has ushered people in the era of digital interaction so as to form an interactive community in the form of a virtual community [9]. In this virtual community forum, social interaction, information exchange, discussion, debate, debate have a digital place like the public sphere of Habermas. The advent of the Internet has facilitated the formation of virtual communities, allowing individuals who share similar interests and perspectives to engage and assimilate, regardless of geographical constraints. These communities can appear on various digital platforms, including social media platforms, online forums, and WhatsApp groups. For this study, the ILUNI Menwa UI Alumni WhatsApp Group was explicitly studied as an example. The virtual community facilitates social interaction, knowledge exchange, and digital discussion and debate. Community members can engage in public discourse, express their thoughts, and communicate their perspectives through a variety of media, such as written text, visual content, video recordings, or audio messages.

Virtual communities provide forums that facilitate active discussion, information sharing, and the exchange of ideas. This statement explains elements of Habermas' concept of Public Space, where individuals shape public opinion through active participation. Similar to the traditional notion of Public Space, individuals in virtual communities are free to engage in discourse and articulate their perspectives in the absence of censorship or coercion from outside. This statement is in line with Habermas's basic concept of freedom of expression. Virtual communities often serve as platforms to engage in debate, encourage collaboration, and facilitate the identification of resolutions to public issues. This phenomenon gives rise to a dynamic Public Space where many perspectives can be considered.With the formation of virtual communities with ease of entry into the digital public sphere, it raises the tendency of easy information sharing. But sometimes, the dissemination of this information can involve information that can be accounted for or invalid information that is deliberately disseminated for certain purposes [10]. This condition makes the virtual community which is a digital public sphere very potential as a means of spreading digital hoaxes.

IV.   CONCLUSION

WhatsApp plays an important role in spreading digital misinformation, particularly regarding Covid-19-related material. The spread of hoaxes includes a series of deceptive content around false data, false health-related information, and unsubstantiated statements. The spread of Covid-19 misinformation through the ILUNI Menwa UI Alumni WhatsApp Group has significantly affected public perception. Individuals who are targeted by hoaxes in groups tend to have an inaccurate understanding of the pandemic, which manifests as increased levels of confusion and reduced trust in official information.The importance of digital literacy becomes clear when tackling the spread of misinformation. Group members must be able to distinguish, authenticate, and effectively handle information they encounter within the WhatsApp network. Group administrators play an important role in minimizing the spread of false information by actively regulating and diligently verifying the accuracy and authenticity of shared content. This study explains the diverse perceptions and reactions shown by individuals in a group in response to hoaxes.

Certain individuals in a group may receive inaccurate information without undergoing a verification process, whereas others actively verify the information or seek clarity.This study has explained WhatsApp's main function as a platform for spreading digital hoaxes within the ILUNI Menwa UI Alumni WhatsApp Group virtual community, resulting in conclusive findings. The impact of providing false information is largely related to public perceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study also emphasizes the importance of digital literacy among group members and underscores the important responsibility of group administrators in minimizing the spread of false information.In the context of a complex digital information age, where the spread of inaccurate information can have significant consequences, this study offers an important explanation regarding the mechanisms underlying the spread of false content in virtual communities. The research contributes to a deeper knowledge of the difficulties the general public faces in understanding information sent through social media platforms such as WhatsApp, although there is no specific and actionable advice.This research aims to drive progress on comprehensive and impactful initiatives in digital literacy and increase the sense of responsibility in virtual communities to uphold the integrity of disseminated information. By adopting this approach, districts can effectively address barriers associated with the spread of misinformation, aiming to foster more precise and evidence-based public understanding when facing public health crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and other important issues

V.   ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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