Civic engagement: Digital activism of university students in Malang amidst Covid-19 pandemic

Nurbani Yusuf 1, Arif Prasetyo Wibowo 1

1 Pancasila and Civic Education Study Program, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Malang, Indonesia

ABSTRACT
This research aims to discover and analyze: a) The digital activism of university students in Malang amidst COVID-19 pandemic, b) The media used by the students to run the digital activism amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and c) Political movements carried out by the students amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. This present research implemented qualitative approach using case study to describe the findings of phenomena that occur in the field. Taking concern on the discussed issue in the research, the case study method required several field data that are contextual and actual. Meanwhile, the results of this research found that the use of digital space as a place to carry out activism activities is one form of social change. It is observed that students’ activism amid the COVID-19 outbreak has changed pattern. The change was a move from conventional, mass gathering, into online using a variety of platform. This change in carrying out students’ political movement has succeeded in attracting public attention which resulted in the success of political movements and gathering and amplifying “attention” on certain social issues

Introduction
The facts related to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia have six challenges grouped into three tests and three dangers in the practice of democracy in Indonesia. First, a test for the existence and commitment to the principles of the unitary state; second, a test for the capability of the central and local government leadership; third, a test on social cohesion and ‘adherence’ to state authority; fourth, a danger of the politicization of Covid-19 for political imagery ahead of the 2021 presidential election; fifth, a danger of politicizing the Covid-19 social assistance program to mobilize supporters ahead of the 2020 simultaneous contestation of the regional election; and sixth, a danger of politicizing social restriction policies to suppress the right to express aspirations in the public sphere (S. Hidayat, 2020).

According to Habermas, the public sphere is a space where every citizen can negotiate his/her mutual relationship. Thus, it is an institutional area to interact on different matters. Conceptually, the public sphere is a space for producing and circulating discourse which in its principle is very significant for the State (Kadarshih, 2008). In public space, private persons join to discuss matters of public concern or common interest. This public space is intended to mediate between the community and the state by holding the state’s responsibility to society through publicity. At this stage, public space is designed as an institutional mechanism to rationalize political domination by giving state responsibility to citizens (Supriadi, 2017).

Under the imposition of social restrictions, therefore, public space as the foundation for the operation of procedural democracy did not run well. Thus, the urgency to form a channel of representation and a new public space becomes very compelling for Indonesian society. To such a
degree, when internet penetration has become so massive in society, the internet is positioned as a public space and a new public representation channel (Jati, 2016).

Based on the results of a survey done by the Indonesian Internet Provider Association (APJII), in 2016, as many as 132.7 million people were active internet users out of 256.2 million people in Indonesia (APJII, 2016). In 2017, the number increased to 143.26 million active users out of a total population of 262 million people (APJII, 2017). In 2018, the rise was recorded as many as 171.17 million active users out of a total population of 264.16 million (APJII, 2019). From the data gathered during 2016-2019, it is clear that Indonesian internet active users have experienced an increase which is predicted to grow in the future.

The study of digital politics itself is regarded as a new study in Indonesia. In general, the study on this topic is more related to technology and information issues; thus, the nuances are more technical and numerical. Thus, cyberspace plays a major role in narrowing time, space, and distance that people across islands, continents, and even countries can discuss and interact with each other and help a lot in deepening the process of democracy (democracy deepening) in society so that they can appear as complete demos (Jati, 2016).

Concerning the results of the previous research conducted by Wibowo et al. (2020) about the Indonesian National Student Movement, his research is still consistent with activism that has not yet led to online activism. To sum up, that research is still discussing civil engagement in the form of public space argued by Habermas. Furthermore, the previous research was done by Wibowo et al. (2016) about students’ involvement in transforming the Pancasila values clear enough to describe the activism carried out by the students. In this research, however, the use of internet media in activism has also been mentioned, but it was not sufficiently deep. Discussing online activities in the case of Indonesian middle-class political movements needs to be seen in several stages such as political awareness, civic engagement, and political movements. In each of these stages, the political movements displayed by the Indonesian middle-class have diverse political characters from one another (Jati, 2016).

The political awareness referred to in the online activity stage is awareness of the rights and obligations of citizens. This concern is related to a person’s knowledge of the social and political environment. It is also intertwined with a person’s interest and concern for the community and political environment in which he lives (Surbakti, 1999). Meanwhile, according to Jacoby (2009), “civic engagement encompasses actions wherein individuals participate in activities of personal and public concern that are both individually life enriching and socially beneficial to the community”. Citizen involvement includes actions whereby individuals participate in personal and public concern activities that individually enrich each other and benefit society socially. Political movements are social movements that are usually mobilized against the state and its governmental system, which do not always use violence and armed rebellion and generally express themselves within the framework of democratic values (Singh, 2001).

As one of the educated middle-class groups, university students hold the baton of leadership of the nation and state. Various movements carried out by the youth with the social status of university students, according to Akbar (2016), can be grouped as components of middle-class society. Students as youth from the middle-class group are different from the general public because they are educated people who struggle daily to search for on-campus truth life. Therefore, when they see a different reality in their national life, it causes anxiety among students then actualizes into social movements to enforce changes in the political system of Indonesia.

Today, referring to Jati (2017), there has been a shift from collective action to connective action, indicating that the middle-class now tends to transform into a networking society in today’s
context. Whereas, in the past, the 1998 middle-class generation carried out collective action using street demonstrations, ideological-political issues, the goal of gaining power, moved by the core group, which then expanded into the mass group. In contrast to the post-1998 middle-class generation, connective action was used to carry out its involvement, such as massive involvement in cyberspace, everyday issues, the goal of competing for influence, driven by buzz, which then grew bigger.

From the previously mentioned problems, this study will discuss: a) digital activism of university students in Malang amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, b) media used by university students in Malang to conduct online activism amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, c) political movements carried out by university students in Malang amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Method**

This research used a qualitative approach and a case study method to describe the findings of phenomena in the field. The reason for using the case study method is that the problem examined in this study requires several field data that are contextual and actual. In addition, the qualitative approach also directly presents the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the respondents. Therefore, this qualitative approach has high flexibility, making it easier for the researcher to adapt to the changing situation found in the research (Wibowo, 2020).

Data collection was gathered through interviews, observation, and document study to obtain primary data by involving four student organizations in Malang, are Indonesian National Student Movement / Gerakan Mahasiswa Nasional Indonesia (GMNI), Islamic Student Association / Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (HMI), Indonesian Islamic Student Movement / Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia (PMII), and Muhammadiyah Student Association / Ikatan Mahasiswa Muhammadiyah (IMM). The selection of subjects because those four student organizations were recorded to run long period of activism and significantly contributed to the ongoing democratization process, especially in the public sphere.

Data analysis uses the Analysis Interactive model from Miles & Huberman (1994), which divides analysis activities into several parts, namely: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or data verification. Therefore, in general, the data analysis in this study was carried out into these stages; 1) recording various findings of phenomena that occur in the field using interviews, observations, and documentation studies; 2) reviewing the results of notes from interviews, observations, and document study, which then separates the data which is important and not important. Researchers do this repeatedly to minimize mistakes during data classification, 3) describe the data that has been classified by paying attention to the focus and research objectives, and 4) conduct a final analysis in the form of a research report.

**Result and Discussion**

**Digital Activism of University Students in Malang amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic**

The concept of digital activism emerged when technology could be used to encourage various activities of civil society, in particular, in the context of a democratic country. Over the past few years, various parties around the world have become increasingly aware of and interested in the potential use of digital technology—from hardware such as mobile phones and supporting software, such as the internet and social media, for example, in the context of campaigns for social and political change. These practices were then defined and popularized as “digital activism” (Rahmawan et al., 2020).

Digital activism is said to have the potential to increase public participation in a social movement, and examples of this practice have occurred in various countries worldwide. The debate over what can be recognized as public participation has been held by digital activism scholars. Some
skeptics writing opinions, sharing political news, heated debates in the online forum, or writing and sharing online petitions are all forms of activism. It is also influenced by pejorative terms such as click activism, slactivism, and keyboard activism. On the other hand, there is an argument saying that the practice of activism mediated by online communication and interaction must still result in mass movements, street protests, or various other offline activities (Lim, 2013).

Dealing with the outbreak of COVID-19 recently, according to Hidayat (2020), there are six challenges to democracy which can be classified into three tests and three dangers for democratic practice in Indonesia. First, a test for the existence and commitment to the principles of the unitary state. Second, a test for the capability and quality of the central and local government. Third, a test for social cohesion and “adherence” to state authority. Forth, a danger of politicizing COVID-19 for political imagery ahead of the 2024 presidential election. Fifth, a danger of politicizing the COVID-19 social assistance program to mobilize supporters ahead of the 2020 simultaneous Pilkada (regional election) contestation. Sixth, a danger of politicizing social restriction policies to suppress the right to express aspirations in the public sphere. Discussing online activities of the Indonesian middle class needs to be seen from several stages, such as political awareness, civic engagement, and political movements. In each of these stages, the political movements displayed by the Indonesian middle-class have diverse political characters from one another (Jati, 2016).

Based on the findings in the field, there is a change in the activism pattern of university students in Malang, which is based on political awareness. Prior to the pandemic, activism was carried out conventionally. It was gathering to run the organizational activities. In contrast, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizational activities were switched to the network (online) because the university students in Malang are fully aware of the policies limiting their organizational activities, such as limitation to crowd, gathering, social distancing, as well as following health protocols.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, these activities were grouped into two; they were internal activities such as recruitment of new members, cadres, and systematic studies. Meanwhile, the other two external activities were supervising government policy, conducting advocacy, political education to the community, and volunteering in humanitarian activities. Those activities were done face to face by gathering the mass consisting of members of the student organization and/or coming directly to the community to carry out the activities.

Under the implementation of the Large-Scale Social Restriction (PSBB) policy during the Covid-19 pandemic, the university students in Malang have changed their patterns of activism. Activism activities, initially done by gathering the masses and on-site community participation, have turned into a network (online) because the PSBB is regulated in Government Regulation (PP) Number 21 Year 2020 requires restrictions on activities in public places/facilities.

The PSBB has changed various forms of community behavior, which then requires physical distance in the process of social interaction. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced the community to adapt to any forms of social change that it causes. Some problems emerge have presented a pressure for social transformation in society. It is impossible that civilization and humanitarian order will experience a shift in a direction and form that is far different from the previous conditions. In this context, the behaviors and habits of society conventionally in the pre-pandemic period are then regulated and transformed through virtual interaction patterns.

An educated middle-class society component makes students different and have their characteristics in carrying out their social responsibilities. Therefore, in responding to the situation during the Covid-19 pandemic, they have different forms than the general public because students are a group of people who in their daily life are accustomed to wrestling to search for truth in the
classroom activities, thus, when students feel different things from their social life, their feelings will be actualized into various actions.

The use of digital space as a place for activism activities carried out by the university students in Malang amidst the Covid-19 pandemic is a form of social change that can occur due to the willingness to accept new experiences and openness to renewal, having the ability to have or express an idea towards number of problems arise from the surrounding environment, respecting and being able to consider and planning the time, having the ability to convince human life, believing in justice to equal distribution, and believing in science and technology and education (Inkeles, 1986).

**Media Used by University Students in Malang to Run Online Activism amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic**

Digital activism carried out by the university students in Malang amidst the Covid-19 pandemic requires media to maintain democracy in Indonesia. The media in question is a communication channel (Indriana, 2011). Media are various forms of communication, both printed and audiovisual and other equipment. The media should be able to get manipulated, be seen, heard, and read. The limitation is that media is anything that can be used to transmit messages from sender to receiver so that it can stimulate thoughts, feelings, attention, and interests so that the process of delivering information can occur (Sudiman, 2007).

The field study findings have revealed that it is known that the activism of university students in Malang during the Covid-19 outbreak has undergone a pattern change. The change in the pattern of activism has changed from conventional mass gathering in each activity to online one by utilizing various platforms. The media utilized by the university students in Malang include Google Meet, Zoom, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook.

The university students in Malang used various kinds of social media platforms as an adaptive effort taken to remain productive during the Covid-19 pandemic. Political awareness as an agent of change, social control, and iron stock is a social responsibility that the university students in Malang well realized. Students involvement as citizens in contributing to the ongoing democratization process is a form of civic engagement, which during the Covid-19 pandemic has transformed from conventional activism, i.e the use of public space in the sense that Habermas has turned into a cyberspace as a medium for citizens to be able to negotiate relations with others.

**Picture. 1**

The Examples Of College Student Movements In Social Media

The finding that the many social media features accessed by the university students in Malang as an educated middle-class group indicate over-connectedness. These indications pinpoint a high
intensity for the Indonesian middle-class to communicate and socialize based on common themes, issues, and interests. The existence of communication via social media has created a network society. Network society defines the formation of online citizenship ties based on common interests in specific issues and topics. The recent development of globalization places the communication channels, the public, and policy advocacy agents no longer in the national sphere and the international sphere.

These various exciting patterns are found in the digital activism of the Malang-educated middle class. Through social media that is used, it can build networks based on friendship bonds which then develop into other forms of bonds such as ideological bonds, bonds of interest in something, or specialization of certain issues, even though they do not know them before. This phenomenon then leads to the implications for redefining the context of citizenship in the public sphere. Previously in classical theory, the public sphere was formed based on citizenship based on land (*ius soli*) and blood (*ius sanguinis*). However, the existence of cyberspace as a public space then creates a deterritorialization of citizenship, thus giving rise to the basis of internet citizenship (netizenship). In addition to eliminating the existence of *ius soli* and *ius sanguinis*, an important question in this netizenship is the context of sense of belonging and the context of token of membership being carried out. The logic of public space saves the existence of a national context as a single vessel for forming this public space. Various terms have emerged, such as *Twitterland* and *Facebookland*, to negate the meaning and existence of the nation, but what kind of identity does cyberspace represent. Thus, to answer such a question, the most important thing is to compare parameters between Habermas’ old conception of public space and public space as cyberspace (Jati, 2016).

The use of various media carried out by the university students in Malang as an educated middle-class group in carrying out their digital activism amid the Covid-19 pandemic is a positive impact of internet communication/information technology which has brought fundamental changes, particularly in regards to receiving the quality of information/data materials that are increasingly effective and large, as well as a wider range of targets/international networks, with an increasingly rapid flow of spread (Hamidjojo, 1998).

**Political Movements Run by the University Students in Malang amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Young generations have very open opportunities to utilize social media to develop their activities such as community empowerment and develop themselves as part of civil society. Young people as agents of change and supervisors of the running government make the new media a space to monitor government performance. Young people also use new media as a space for discussion to criticize government policies. The youth community is not only active in cyberspace but also creates movements in the real world. Utilizing community social media driven by the youth, young people put their effort into responding to society's problems, seeking community support, and carrying out digital activism (Dewantara & Widhyarto, 2015). Civic engagement is often referred to as civic participation. Everything related to citizen action, both individual or collective, is to make government policies and various activities in the community (Karliani, 2014).

There are 19 civic engagement indicators divided into three significant indicators, namely civic indicators, electoral indicators, and political voice indicators. Civic indicators include: (1) solving community problems, (2) volunteering for a non-election organization, (3) participating in membership organizations, (4) taking part in fundraising from running and cycling community, (5) volunteering for candidates or political organizations. In addition, political voice indicators include: (1) contacting officials, (2) contacting media (printed), (3) contacting media (broadcast), (4) conducting protest, (5) organizing petitions via email, (6) writing petition, (7) boycotting, (8) drawing (Keeter et al., 2002).
Based on the findings in the field, political movements carried out by university students in Malang amidst the Covid-19 pandemic divide into two, first, political education movement, a routine activity in every management of students’ organization referring to Articles of Associations/ Bylaws. This activity is implemented into new cadre recruitment and cadres, which are closely done only for the organization's members. Another activity is contemporary routine studies open to the public; meanwhile, it is done entirely online during the pandemic.

Second, political movements act as a pressure group for government policies, advocacy for the community, and volunteer activities for humanity. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this political movement was carried out by participating directly in the form of protests and conveying their aspirations in the public sphere. However, what is interesting during the Covid-19 pandemic becomes more massive, aiming at disseminating contemporary issues that arise to go public, becoming a discussion on social media.

As a pressure group on government policies and advocacy for the community, in their political movement during Covid-19, the university students in Malang activities can be seen through omnibus law policy protest. In responding to this policy, the students protested against the omnibus law policy by gathering a mass of action at Malang City Hall. In volunteering for humanities during the pandemic, the students also took part in distributing the necessities to the community and providing education related to the importance of maintaining distance and complying with health protocols for the public.

Another interesting political movement carried out by the students amidst the Covid-19 pandemic is the relationship between social media users and the interrelated protest and volunteer movements that students do. This correlation can be observed through the political socialization efforts carried out to respond to the current situation and condition through the posted content that students post on social media.

Through the various social media platforms, the students carried out political socialization related to national and regional issues. They pack these issues in various forms, such as pictures and videos containing ongoing problems. Therefore, these images and videos can become a public conversation in cyberspace and can even be used as a medium of information to socialize what agenda will be conducted.

An example of the relationship between social media and political movements driven by the university students in Malang is the omnibus law. The students in Malang from different
organizational groups flocked to socialize the call for collective action, with the end-meeting point at Malang City Hall. The call for joint action was done through various social media accounts that students have; thus, cyberspace, social media can turn into waves of student protests in response to the omnibus law issue.

Political movements are social movements (Singh, 2001). Student’s movement is part of a social movement as a collective effort to promote or fight change in a society or group (Lin, 1992). According to Eric Hoffer (in Akbar, 2016), the goal of social movements is to bring about change. The factors causing social movements amidst the Covid-19 pandemic still emphasize suffering deprivation (loss, deprivation, and suffering), for example, in the economic sector (loss opportunities to meet the needs of clothing, food, and shelter). With his concept of relative deprivation, Davies argues that although the level of community satisfaction continues to increase, there is possible that there is a gap between people’s expectations and the real conditions at hand. The gap between meeting the community needs and what is obtained is a real happening. Thus, this is called relative deprivation. If this relative gap gets bigger then it crosses the tolerance limits of society. For example, because of economic and social growth followed by stagnation or even sudden decline, then a revolution will spark. In conclusion, the causes of social movements, in their view, are based on economic problems (deprivation due to the far gap between expectations and reality from the fulfillment of basic needs). However, the core cause of social movements as added by Light, Keller, and Calhoun is not always placed on the domination of the role of economic deprivation, as the level of deprivation is still determined by the maximization of the ability to mobilize human and natural resources such as leadership, organization, and involvement, as well as other resources, i.e funds and facilities (R. A. Hidayat, 2007).

The use of social media as a form of digital activism by the university students in Malang in carrying out their political movements during the Covid-19 pandemic has succeeded in attracting the audience’s attention, resulting in the success of the movement in gathering and amplifying “attention” on certain social issues. However, in this context, being popular and having a large audience must be continued with audience management as important resources (Karpf, 2018).

Drawing the political movement case phenomenon, it is a form of intersection between online reality in cyberspace and offline reality in the real world that has occurred in students’ activism in Malang amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in response to the omnibus law issue. To conclude, this social movement has four characteristics: a movement built through a network of informal interactions, feeling and mutual solidarity, conflict as a focus for collective action, and social movement promoting forms of protest (Porta & Diani, 1999).

Students’ activism in Malang amid the Covid-19 pandemic using technology as an alternative media in socializing political movements is observed to create and arouse middle-class cohesiveness. This phenomenon can potentially create people power from the Indonesian middle class because the movement is only based on chat on social media. The existence of a sense of affection and affiliation with the issues formed in social media is a driving force for the middle class to demonstration. The two feelings lead to forming a sense of collegiality then building a communal movement (Jati, 2016).

The involvement of students as citizens (civic engagement) of an educated middle-class group is based on an awareness that is initiative and sincere without intimidation from others. Therefore, in practice, everything involved will be based on encouragement from within the individual himself in solving problems in the community (Karliani, 2014). Thus, civic awareness and civic participation are the main keys in shaping civic engagement (Lisberger, 2002).

Conclusion
Using social media as a form of digital activism done by the university students in Malang in carrying out their political movements during the Covid-19 pandemic has succeeded in attracting public attention, resulting in the success of political gathering amplifying “attention” on certain social issues. Using technology as an alternative media in socializing political movements carried out by the students can create and arouse middle-class cohesiveness artificially and communally. This phenomenon can potentially trigger people's power from the Indonesian middle-class because it is only based on chat on social media platforms.

References


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