



# Expressions of hatred and the formation of spiral of anxiety on social media in Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

In Indonesia, expressions of hatred on Twitter are initially understood as a manifestation of freedom of speech in the current democratic era. Subsequently, such expressions have been exploited as a means of conducting a smear campaign during Indonesia's 2012 Regional Election, 2014 Presidential Election, and 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial Election. This study found that various hate speeches regarding politics and religious beliefs on Twitter may have instigated *twitwars* due to three factors: *first*, an issue or phenomenon bearing controversial content(s); *second*, an opinion provoking or containing expressions of hatred; *third*, two individuals or groups with dissenting interests, positions, and political choices in real life. Furthermore, the main finding of this study indicates that expressions of hatred, *twitwars* on Twitter, and excessive activities on other social media platforms may form a spiral of anxiety among netizens. Such anxiety may affect netizens actively engaged in social media or even those who passively use them. A spiral of anxiety begins when anxiety is experienced by an individual due to the overwhelming surge of hate expressions on Twitter and other social media. This personal anxiety gradually expands into group anxiety, intergroup anxiety, and ultimately, communal anxiety. The study's findings may, consequently, have implications on the shifting of the social construct as a result of social media activities. There may also be implications on regulations relating to freedom of expression in democratic countries. Thus, subsequent studies can further explore how social construct is formed based on social media activities or how freedom of speech on social media may threaten democracy. Research data were acquired through in-depth interviews with four netizens actively engaged as opinion leaders on Twitter (minimum criteria: posted at least 20 statuses daily, have a minimum of 5,000 followers, and have been involved in a *twitwar* containing expressions of hatred), and reviews of literature relevant to the study.

Keywords: ***expression of hatred, Twitter, spiral of anxiety, social media, twitwar***

## INTRODUCTION

A survey conducted by the Indonesian Internet Service Provider Association in November 2017 (APJII, 2017) showed that as many as 143.26 million people out of the 262 million Indonesian population (54.68%) were internet users. Of the 143.26 million internet users, as many as 89.35% used the internet for chatting, while 87.13% used it for accessing social media. This data indicates that 128 million Indonesians used the internet for chatting and social media as the most frequently accessed source for fulfilling all their information needs.

The exponential upsurge of social media usage in Indonesia as a source of public information has thus, altered social interaction patterns (Lim, 2017). This due to social media's particular characteristic that enables every user to not only consume information, but also produce it as well. This new characteristic allows anyone active on the social media to engage and be involved as both information consumers and producers. Every social media activist or user can even take on the role of a message distributor (Weeks & Holbert, 2013). Some experts have thus, declared social media to be a determining factor in the dramatic change of the communication structure that had been stable for some time. This marks the transition from the mass communication era to the interactive digital communication era (Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012).

This unique social media characteristic allows anybody to share information to the public or to anyone in particular. Moreover, every individual on social media has the authority to choose and form opinions to their liking. In Indonesia, this potentiality becomes more unrestricted as it is encouraged and supported by the existing democratic climate that ensures each person's freedom of speech and opinion on social media. The online communities and social media are considered to take on the role as agents of social and political change (Gordon, 2017). Social media, such as Twitter, has opened up a new model of communication channel between Indonesian political parties and their constituencies. According to Beers (2014), activities on social media have a positive impact on political communication in Indonesia. In his opinion, tweets on general election politics received the most reaction from netizens, indicating that political themes continue to be an interesting public discussion topic on social media.

When such a specific social media characteristic thrives in an unrestricted democratic climate, social media activities in Indonesia becomes highly dynamic. The level of activities on social media may even impact social movements and political changes in Indonesia (Lim, 2014a, Nugroho & Syarief, 2012). Lim (2014b) mentioned that activities on the social media result in what is called hidden transcripts, that is, public critique of power through various social media channels. The hidden transcripts, in contrast, may be construed as virtual anxiety wherein criticisms forwarded to rulers in turn create circles of anxieties among the public.

Freedom of speech or opinion in an unrestricted democratic climate channelled via the social media may induce various expressions of hatred to emerge amongst members of the public. As a consequence, in a liberal democratic system—since state administration relies on public participation—the state basically takes on the role as a referee. Hence, the resilience and durability of the state and politics are frequently pitted, tested, and disputed by the community via online channels (Fuchs & Trottier, 2015). These various disputes found on social media take place openly and in real time.

Expression of hatred may be defined as defamation of a particular group's identity in order to oppress its members and undermine their rights (George, 2017). In relation to various

social media activities observed in Indonesia, I propose to define expression of hatred on social media as communication activities on social media in the form of texts, images, or videos containing revilement, insult, taunt that essentially degrade one's ethnicity, religion, race, group, skin colour, physical conditions (disability), beliefs, teaching, political choice, or other identities with the intent of silencing their voice, cornering and oppressing them, or creating resentment, embarrassment, guilt, and various other uncomfortable feelings or conditions. According to Pohjonen and Udupa (2017), numerous extreme and severe expressions of hatred take place not only in Indonesia, but also in India and Ethiopia as well, implying that it is a global phenomenon.

In Indonesia, hatred expressed on social media can be seen unfolding in the realms of religion and politics (George, 2017). In practice, hate speech conveyed on Twitter often leads to a *twitwar*, a term used to describe a situation wherein two or more accounts engage in a status war regarding a particular issue. This status war ensues without any clear set of rules allowing truly uninhibited freedom of expression. As a result, anyone can express their hatred to whomever they desire via social media.

A status war between the accounts @panca66 and @redinparis is an example of one of the most phenomenal political *twitwars* in Indonesia. The *twitwar*, which occurred in 2015, started with a debate on Indonesia-Malaysia's collaboration in producing an automobile called *Proton*, wherein President Jokowi attended the signing ceremony in Malaysia. The account @redinparis showed support to the collaboration by posting statuses on Twitter, while @panca66 had opposed the collaborative efforts of the two countries. The debate on Twitter turned into a *twitwar* that was eventually settled through a physical altercation between the two in real life (Nurdiansyah, 2015). In addition to the example above, another three-cornered *twitwar* which was resolved through a direct and open debate took place in 2017 between Rachlan Nasidik from Democratic Party, Budiman Sudjatmiko from Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, and Indra J. Piliang from Golkar Party. The open debate finally ended the *twitwar* on the issue of religious radicalism (Dariyanto, 2017). Both the *twitwar* examples given above developed as a result of two or more individuals having dissenting interests and political orientations provoked further by various hatred-containing posts. *Twitwars* may, consequently, impact on netizens' activities on social media as they involve opinion leaders who are also opinion makers on Twitter.

In the context of Indonesian democracy, groups critical of the ruling government often deliver various forms of hate speech on social media, while those in support are also observed to do the same. Such severe and prolonged tension from social media activities may be described as circles of anxiety which evolve into a spiral of anxiety within the virtual community. Based on this particular background, this article attempts to answer the question: *how can expressions of hatred on Twitter form a spiral of anxiety on social media?*

A spiral of anxiety may be defined as an intensifying anxiety experienced by an individual in a concealed manner due to his/her having differing political proclivity from others, in which such differences translate into dialogues containing expressions of hatred at all levels of social media platforms, thereby adding to the existing anxiety. Excessive online activities, dependence on information disseminated via social media, contents involving political hate speeches, and social media's failure as a neutral and objective institution in presenting news about stark political differences may accelerate the rise of such spirals of anxiety, which is an emerging phenomenon in the current era of cyber society and new media.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media is a generic term used for interactions that take place between individuals covering various online platforms with differing attributes, communication formats, and sociability functions. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined social media as a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Social media is considerably unique due to its attributes that may potentially influence various aspects of life in the real world.

Mayfield (2008) identified five specific characteristics underlying the operation of all social media, namely public participation, openness, conversation, development of communities, and interconnectedness among its users. These characteristics have placed us in an entirely new and different context that is more dynamic, open, and occurring within a single virtual arena.

Further, the easy access and use of social media through mobile phones or gadgets has drastically altered the communication pattern between individuals (Mun, Li & Fernandez, 2011). Social media has ushered in an extremely dynamic situation that it has become difficult to articulate. Some new insights pertaining to social media relate it to the ever-evolving digital technology and emphasises on user-generated contents or interactions (Lim, 2014b). Social media, through its delivery feature, is capable of identifying the direction of a message (Kent, 2010) or utilizing particular instruments, such as Facebook or Twitter, to exhibit its model of interaction (Howard & Parks, 2012).

Social media can be identified as a part of the cyberspace from its six key features (Nasrullah, 2014, p.177), namely:

1. *Intertextuality*, meaning that every text may be interlinked to other texts and can be mutually 'speaking'. Hence, the meaning of a text, at times, can only be 'read' and understood upon reading other related texts. Furthermore, these intertextual networks may produce context.
2. *Nonlinearity*, meaning that is impossible to predict every movement of a conversation in a linear manner. A conversation topic may develop into and generate other new topics.
3. *Blurring of the reader/writer distinction*, meaning there is a vague distinction between the reader and the writer. A netizen may initially be a consumer of information, wherein the information is then repackaged and redistributed as a new content. Conclusively, such reproduction of information demonstrates the subtle distinction between information consumers and producers.
4. *Multimediality*, meaning there is a convergence of text, audio, video, images, and other means.
5. *No gatekeeper*, meaning there is no 'guardian' responsible for selecting information going in and out of social media as is the case of mainstream media.
6. *Ephemerality*, meaning that texts on social media are unstable in nature, wherein a text may be easily removed deliberately or otherwise.

Therefore, social media is not merely a media utilised for establishing social network relations but can be expanded to cover an individual's activities, practices, habit, behaviour or lifestyle in interacting with the virtual world. Social media may, generally, be understood as

an online platform to interact, collaborate, and create/share various types of digital contents (Mayfield, 2008).

Twitter, in Indonesia, is a form of social media that is exerting considerable influence on political change and social movement. Beers' (2014) research showed that Twitter is a novel landscape with the potential of establishing better political communication in Indonesia. This is concurred by Nugroho (2012), Lim (2014a), and Galuh (2016), who also confirmed that social media activities have influence on social movements in Indonesia that incite mass protests. However, Lim (2014b) contended that social media activities in Indonesia do not necessarily evoke political changes. Lim (2014b) emphasized that social media is neither an agent of change (in social movement) nor indication of democratic growth. Nonetheless, the participatory culture nurtured within the social media has potentials for developing and maintaining social movements. As a result, people still consider issues or opinions that develop on conventional mass media as a reference. However, the high level of activities on Twitter in Indonesia, within a different context, can still lead to various virtual anxieties that remained undiscussed in the studies presented by Nugroho and Syarief (2012), Lim (2014a, 2013b), and Galuh (2016).

Conversely, political discussions held on the social media may strengthen groups with identical political perspectives. This does not instantaneously weaken the perspective of groups with differing political views because they can also be found in the same social media. Gromping (2014) has referred to this as an echo chamber. Gromping's study examined the political communication that took place on Facebook concerning rival groups involved in the 2014 Thailand Presidential election. He found that conversations about the election that took place on the social media were becoming deliberative, leading to the development of groups or thought clusters that were shut out from other groups' dissenting views, which he referred to as an enclave group. He further asserted that social media is an echo chamber which is incapable of developing exchanges of thoughts and critical reflection on various public issues.

In addition to strengthening one's political perspective due to the presence of others upholding similar perspectives, activities on social media groups such as WhatsApp, Twitter, or Facebook may also lead to moral panic. Cohen (1972) defined moral panic as an emerging condition, episode, individual or group that becomes defined as a threat to societal values and interest. Referring to the echo chamber and moral panic theory, I assume that Twitter users who are either active or passive in a twitwar would subsequently create more closed and exclusive WhatsApp or Facebook groups. These closed groups would accordingly serve as an uninhibited platform for expressing various forms of hatred toward other groups with opposing religious and political views.

The various expressions of hatred in the WhatsApp or Facebook groups are deviant virtual behaviour that may trigger more expansive moral panic. This explains the common notion that mass media content alone is incapable of causing moral panic (Miller & Reilly, 1994). Research conducted by Periyayya and Krishnan (2012) showed that three newspapers in Africa succeeded in developing moral panic related to the deviant activities of certain African nationals. In addition to mass media publications, deviant activities on social media, such as expressions of hatred, may be a causal factor in moral panic.

This also demonstrates that social media presence and the ensuing changes do not necessarily align with the development of culture, values, or morals of that particular society. To some, social media may offer hope, whereas to others it may create anxiety as it contains various expressions of hatred. Activities on social media subsequently trigger various social

reactions in the form of excessively conducted mass protests. Lim (2013a) posited this as a linear consequence of the unpredictability of social media. In another article, Lim (2012) argued that technology does not operate in a vacuum. Technology advances and develops in a social context. The social impact of the Internet is a result of the organic interaction between existing technology and prevalent cultural, political, and social structures.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach which involves an interpretive and naturalistic perspective to the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The primary data for this study was collected through in-depth interviews with several respondents and literature review. Referring to Wimmer and Dominick (2014), an in-depth interview is conducted to provide a detailed background on the respondent's rationale for providing specific responses. The respondents interviewed were CPL (Respondent 1), BE (Respondent 2), CH (Respondent 3), and HSW (Respondent 4). The respondents were selected based on feasibility and ease of access (Stokes, 2006) as well as their competencies, instead of representativeness (Bernard, 1998) because the main purpose is interviewing individuals capable of providing adequate data in explaining the subject matter.

First, I observed Twitter timelines with a specific focus on contents of hatred. Subsequently, a number of Twitter accounts (both pseudonyms and real names) that frequently put out expressions of hatred on social media were identified. The cause of spiral of anxiety are Twitter accounts that disseminate hate contents, which were then debated in a twitwar and spread throughout various other social media channels expansively and openly.

Each interview started with the most common question, "*What is your opinion concerning expressions of hatred on social media that are being conveyed through a number of Twitter accounts?*". The interview then moves on several more specific questions pertaining to their thoughts and feelings when reading a social media status containing expressions of hatred, for instance, "*What are your initial thoughts and feeling upon reading contents of hatred on social media?*". Other questions were subsequently developed based on the responses provided by the respondents.

The collected data was subsequently processed, categorised, and generalised so that they may be presented interpretatively and descriptively. The data was then organised thematically based on the relevance of research issues. The final procedure of data analysis was to extract correlations and coherence from the organized in the form of theoretical assumptions or perspectives. Referring to the echo chamber and moral panic theory, I assume that netizens who are active or passive on Twitter have closed groups on other social media platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook groups. These closed social media groups are ideal uninhibited sites for venting various expressions of hatred toward other groups of differing religious and political views.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Freedom of speech, freedom to hate, and the rise of twitwar*

According to Benedictus (2016), hate speech-related phenomenon frequently occurred in Indonesia. In a span of one year (2013 – 2014), there was a 53% increase of cases (from 41 to 72) in violation of Law 11/2008 of Electronic Transactions and Information. The records show that 92% of reports were related to defamation cases, while the remaining 5% pertained to articles on religious blasphemy, 1% concerned the induction of threat, 1% insult, and 1% slander.

In Indonesia, such social media activities are highly intensive, thus, causing circulation of information on social media to become more vibrant and vociferous. The intense and incessant flow of information circulating on social media leave the public (netizens) no interval period to rectify or verify the validity of the disseminated information. This situation may, at times, promote lies to be exhaustively discussed as correct and accurate information. The extensive freedom promised by democracy along with the advancement of internet-based technology have consequently triggered various expressions of hatred on social media.

According to Respondent 1, one of the opinion leaders on Twitter, expression of hatred was, initially, a mere expression of euphoria pertaining to the freedom of speech delivered through a new platform known as social media. Such expressions of hatred are deemed effective when utilised for conducting negative campaigns during general elections. It was subsequently used as a technique in cyber warfare.

*“Since the beginning, around 2007, it (expressions of hatred – Researcher) has existed, but not systematic. Expressions of hatred only become more systematic leading up to the 2011 Jakarta Regional Election. In its initial period, around 2007, social media users were still unable to control it and lacked the understanding that this channel is highly unrestricted. But, I have observed that it (expressions of hatred – Researcher) was initially an euphoria and was then selected as a technique for combat or war. So, the tools are social media or Twitter, then there are techniques for agitation and provocation used in 2012 during the Jakarta Regional Election. The war then intensified in 2014 during the Presidential Election.” (Respondent 1, February 2017).*

Such polarisation only obviously began to take shape in the period leading up to the 2012 Jakarta Gubernatorial election and the 2014 Presidential Election. During these two periods, clashes of discourses, information, opinions, issues, and rumours in the cyber world manifested in the form of twitwars between one group and another. In 2012, at the time of the Jakarta Election, these clashes bombarded the pages of social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, as was the case during the 2014 Presidential Election (Lim, 2017 and Syahputra, 2017).

As explained earlier, twitwar is a term used to explain a situation in which a war of statuses ensues on Twitter with unrestricted freedom and no clear set of rules. As a result, anyone can express their hatred to any individual or group they desire via social media. Social media is, thus, no longer just a space for expressing ideas, but has become a place for expressing various forms of hatred, enabled further by anonymous Twitter accounts.

In Indonesia, @triomacan2000 was a well-known Twitter account at the time, capable of triggering public debates and provoking various expressions of hatred (Rikang, 2014).

Aside from the @triomacan2000 account, @kurawa (Puspitasari, 2016) and @partaisocmed (Asfar, 2016) also frequently posted tweets bearing controversial contents. These three accounts are pseudonymous accounts, i.e. accounts using aliases. Pseudonymous accounts can be specified into two types, firstly, those used to protect oneself or safeguard the owner's confidentiality. Secondly, a Twitter account may use a pseudonym but it is acknowledged as belonging to someone verifiable.

Some of these pseudonymous account statuses were deemed interesting and gained the attention of netizens. In some cases, a Twitter account might generate controversy and get netizens interested (DetikInet, 2012). Some, however, lodged a formal complaint with the police (Pertwi, 2012). Controversial information triggering disputes on Twitter were often found to originate from non-anonymous accounts. Those controversies then manifest in various arguments that subsequently developed into twitwars, and some even end in physical altercations as seen in the @panca66 vs @redinparis incident (Nurdiansyah, 2015).

Pseudonym accounts often appear during certain political momentum such as the 2012 Regional Election, 2014 Presidential Election, and 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election. These accounts are known as political buzzers and they are extremely cunning and adept at manipulating deceit, and twisting hatred and various idiocy into public issues via Twitter. Unwittingly, the frenzied and massive activities of buzzers on social media has negative implications on the digital democracy. The term buzzer may have been derived from the concept of buzz marketing, which is a type of product marketing conducted through communication media channels to create disruptions for competitors to attract targeted audience. These buzzers are individuals who trigger controversial issues on social media, particularly Twitter, thereby creating discussions that are expected to go viral among netizens.

For a tweet to go viral, a Twitter account acting as the buzzer is supported by tens or even hundreds of robot accounts (known as bot accounts created to carry out automatic tasks such as retweeting), or buzzer accounts that respond back and forth in discussing the issue. The buzzer phenomenon in Indonesia, began gaining traction when social media such as Twitter in 2009 was deemed successful in prompting social movement, via the hashtag #Indonesiaunite, in opposing the terror-bombing in Mega Kuningan, Jakarta.

Hatred-filled comments or opinions can be disseminated through the buzzers' posts on social media. These various expressions of hatred, subsequently, provoke others to respond thereby causing a twitwar. According to Respondent 2, an opinion leader on Twitter who had been involved in several twitwars, there are several causes which may lead to a twitwar, as described below.

- A real-life phenomenon that is related to a controversial issue. An example is FPI's (Islamic Defenders Front) raids on nightlife entertainment establishments during the holy month of *Ramadhan*. FPI's actions consequently garnered numerous responses and prompted netizens to voice their opinions via social media. The exchange of responses escalated at such a rapid pace that it triggered a twitwar.
- A one-sided provocative opinion presented by a netizen via social media. The opinion may stimulate other netizens to virtually engage in the dispute thereby leading to subsequent arguments that could trigger a twitwar.
- Clearly opposing positions concerning a particular issue, phenomenon, or reality held by two different parties. This factor relates to a form of fanaticism, such as differing opinions between sports fans.

The three factors given above are some of the causes that may trigger a twitwar which may take place with anyone on any given subject. This study however, focuses on twitwars related to political issues and netizens' critical reception towards people in power or authority. Within this context, twitwar is the most severe and real form of cyber warfare on social media. In social media, twitwars do not require location, rely on time or recognise who is fighting against who (Rid, 2013). Social media is included in cyberspace as it is a form of internet-based media development. In terms of political activities, the domain of social media and the physical domain of real life present an interdependent relationship (Lim, 2006) whereby the social media domain influences the physical domain and vice versa. Activities on social media are thus, influenced by the public's conduct in using it.

### *Activities on Social Media and the Formation of Spiral of Anxiety*

The twitwar phenomenon and excessive activities on social media may produce a spiral of anxiety faced by netizens who are, actively or inactively, involved in social media. The nature of impact on individuals active on social media is actually inconspicuous and personal. It is an anxiety that develops within oneself as a result of the intense upsurge of information on social media. It is unseen and not openly expressed in the public domain but gradually builds up, confined within the individual. However, thanks to specific triggers such as an expression of hatred aimed at an individual's or group's political beliefs or religious teachings, all those pent-up anxieties are unleashed through various opinions and comments on social media.

The variety of pent-up anxiety that seethe within an individual may become expansive and can subsequently affect other individuals (netizens). These anxieties are slowly released through conversations that develop on closed virtual groups such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups. The speed in which the spiral of anxiety's exposure expands is influenced by the quickness, intensity, and extent of discourse, opinion, issue, or rumour discussed on social media. Under such conditions, the virality of discourse, opinion, issue, or rumour on social media can further contribute to the intensity and expansiveness of the anxiety.

Social media, such as WhatsApp, is an instrument that can be used for public engagement and participation pertaining to political and civil issues, particularly in finding a collective solution to broad social issues such as food security, pollution, government corruption, and public health risks (Wei, 2016). This explains the various closed chats that take place in WhatsApp groups where exchange of information is conducted freely among group members. The members of the group may be mutually acquainted, so there is no restriction in delivering comments or responses.

Nevertheless, while cultural diversity is often considered within such closed and restricted conversations, the Indonesian community's political proclivities also influence the type of information received. This includes the selection and discussion of information conveyed by the mainstream media, which is regarded as conventional media. Media channels that do not conform to their inclinations are often labelled as practicing partisan bias (Stroud, Muddiman & Lee, 2014).

These various closed chats become a discursive space for discussing different topics that trend in public conversations on more open social media such as Twitter. The contents of the closed group chats may even be utilised as materials to form opinions on Twitter and make them go viral, which frequently leads to a twitwar. According to Respondent 3, both twitwar and the virality of discourse, opinion, issue, or rumour on social media have a specific pattern. This indicates that it is common practice for individuals to design issues or plan for its

virality on social media. Godes and Mayzlin (2004) asserted that laypersons on social media have a greater tendency to disseminate negative information, which may trigger anger, anxiety, and sadness (Barrett & James, 1998). Subsequently, this study found that negative information which had gone viral on social media was the result of the following pre-designed pattern:

1. A discourse, opinion, issue, or rumour is initiated and introduced by an opinion leader or opinion maker on social media.
2. The discourse, opinion, issue, or rumour is discussed by a number of anonymous accounts.
3. The discourse, opinion, issue, or rumour is made viral by using robot accounts (artificial accounts utilised to intensify conversations on social media).
4. The discourse, opinion, issue, or rumour is made public on fraudulent websites (news websites that lack credibility).
5. The discourse, opinion, issue, or rumour is made public on mainstream media (credible mainstream media).
6. Anyone who attempts to disrupt the discourse, opinion, issue, or rumour from going viral is harassed.
7. The discourse, opinion, issue, or rumour is disseminated through closed and restricted chats such as WhatsApp groups.

According to Respondent 1, the seven stages described above may sporadically occur on the social media as the actors involved at all levels are within a common interest group.

*“The opinion leader initiates an issue, then it is received by anonymous accounts or vice versa. It is then made viral by robot accounts and published as news by fake media. Once it is observed to gain popularity, the issue is accepted and published by mainstream media without undergoing any check and recheck. If there is any resistance, those who oppose will be bullied. The term is, kill the messenger. Another thing, all of that is distributed via internal media such as WhatsApp. So, starting from the producer of the issue to the distributors and the others, they all come from one group.”* (Respondent 1, February 2017).

To a common netizen, a layperson, the various activities taking place on the social media do not necessarily bear any impact to generate a spiral of anxiety. The spiral of anxiety can be illustrated as an emotional implosion and explosion. Implosion and explosion are concepts initially introduced by Jean Baudrillard to illustrate the detonation of a blast of meaning occurring within each individual as a subject of hyper-realistic conditions (Baudrillard, 1985). The meaning contained within a reality subtly undergoes a shift, wherein the former meaning that existed within oneself is gradually replaced with a new meaning. The shift of meaning occurs at an incredible speed because of two things, intensity of information circulation and excessive interactive activities on the social media. The relation between these two happen so rapidly, incessantly, and intensely that no interval is available for netizens to interrupt its occurrence through reflections, corrections, or verification of information.

Implosion in the social media space has been occurring for quite some time, but has yet to turn into an explosion as no particular incidence had the capacity to trigger one. Additionally, the mainstream media seems uninterested and indifferent to the feelings and thoughts of the masses affected by the implosion. This is an illustration of the various initial conditions leading to broader ensuing conditions and finally, a twitwar. The speed of the shift

from implosion (inner burst of meaning) to explosion (external burst of meaning) is determined by the netizens' activities on social media and their interest in the disseminated opinions, wherein opinions concerning religion and politics are regarded as the most likely topics to trigger explosions.

On one hand, Twitwar may be used as a means to observe or reveal various hidden issues or realities. Previously concealed issues, such as corruption, may be revealed in a twitwar. This may stimulate the public's critical awareness concerning their political system and environment. Yet, on the other hand, twitwar may bring about various virtual violence such as expressions of hatred, profanity, defamation or labelling. The clash of the two may place every individual actively using social media such as Twitter in a state of silent anxiety. They become anxious because they feel they know many things via social media but are unable to do anything.

According to Respondent 4, several other members that he knows in a WhatsApp group, including himself, experience anxiety that remained closed and concealed in nature. It was caused by one's political and religious beliefs being insulted openly through social media.

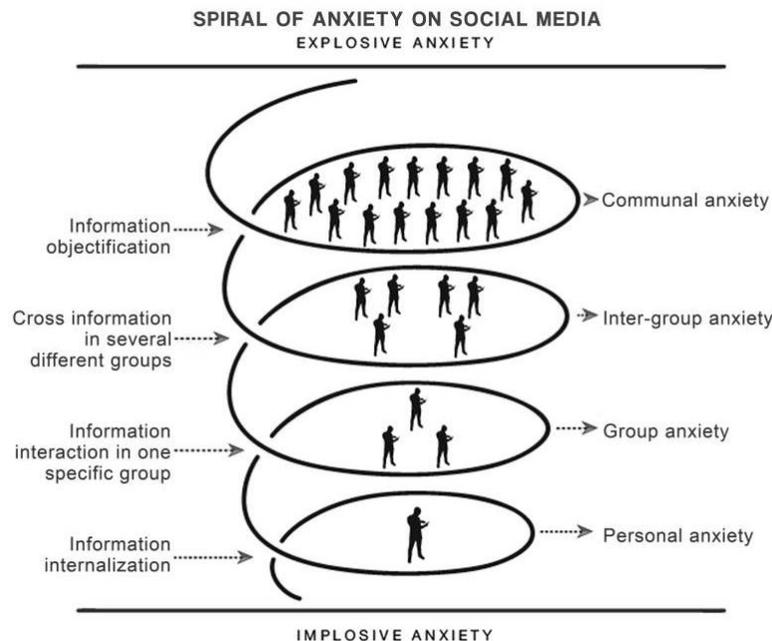
*"In terms of politics and religion, I consider myself a conservative who upholds ethics and proper values, believes in changes that are in line with rules and regulations, does not offend and ruin human relations. Yet, the advent of social media seems to destroy existing stability and the political and religious beliefs I adhere to. I highly revere honesty in politics, for instance, a leader should keep the promises they made during the campaign. But, when I criticize leaders through social media for not fulfilling their promises, I was bullied by their supporters instead. I can accept that the presidential candidate I support in the 2014 election lost. But, I get very upset if the presidential candidate I support is depicted as a fascist NAZI supporter. This is also the case with religion. I think that ulema is someone who should be respected. But, on social media, ulemas are being insulted, disrespected, teased, and even bullied. I initially thought that such condition was only disturbing to my personal self. Yet, I found that in several of the WhatsApp groups I follow, there are others experiencing the same anxiety. In truth, we are mutually repressing anxiety that remained concealed. It seems as if there is a dilemma of wanting to react to those expressions of hatred on social media. But, I am worried that it would be a breach of ethics and that it would only worsen life on social media".* (Respondent 4, March 2017).

However, this personal anxiety then expands and intensifies facilitated by the social and conventional media, particularly conventional media channels that are partisan or side with particular religious or political interest groups. This setting in turn, creates an online community that is becoming more reliant on both the social and conventional media for their consumption and dissemination of news and information concerning politics and religion. Yet, the factors that mobilise various political information found on websites as well as social media are not well understood. This causes negative emotions to surface as the information found are disseminated provocatively.

This virtual reality of social media is not only observed in Indonesia. During the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election, it was found that the use of partisan online news is related to increased anger aimed at the presidential candidate of the opposing party, and the ensuing anger facilitated exchange of information and activities pertaining to the election on the social media (Hassel & Brian, 2016; Dynel & Chovanec, 2015; Fuchs & Sandoval, 2014). Daily news on partisan media played a substantial role in bringing together the constant change of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes in order to define public opinion. Such public opinion and

news may facilitate in forming the attitude and opinion of the masses regarding their political participation (McCombs, 2011). Hassel and Brian's work (2016) showed that the partisan media has the capacity to mobilize online exchange of information by invoking the audience with anger.

The combination of political tendencies, religious beliefs, reliance on insular or narrow-minded discussions on WhatsApp groups, uninhibited circulation of information on social media as well as partisan news-reporting by conventional media magnifies feelings of resentment or anger among netizens. In the case of Indonesia, this anger is often conveyed as expressions of hatred by the online community. These expressions of hatred are considered as part of the process in the spread or expansion of anxiety. The process can be sequentially illustrated and explained as a spiral of anxiety on social media through the following figure:



**Figure 1.** Spiral of anxiety on social media

**1. Personal Anxiety**

An anxiety that develops due to the reception, absorption or internalisation of various information dispersed on various types of social media. At this stage, an information circulating on the social media may be influential in changing one's perspective on a particular issue. The ensuing process observed on social media at this level is a one-way interaction between the subject, user of the social media and object, recipient of the dispersed information.

**2. Group Anxiety**

A mutual anxiety that develops as a result of exchange in information within a group whose members share common interests or have similar characteristics. At this stage, the information circulated on the social media that is believed to contain truth may strengthen the perspectives of like-minded group members. The ensuing process observed on the social media at this level is that of interactive communication within a

specific group chat in which the members mutually know each other well, as is the case of groups found on WhatsApp, Facebook, or via mentions on Twitter.

### 3. Intergroup Anxiety

An anxiety that develops as a result of cross information sharing between one group and another with opposing characteristics yet having common interest on a particular public issue. At this stage, the disseminated information has become a public issue or agenda. The ensuing process observed on the social media at this level is that of interactive communication between one specific group chat with another group wherein a member of the combined groups may not be acquainted with other members within a single group chat on WhatsApp, Facebook, or via mentions on Twitter.

### 4. Communal Anxiety

This refers to a process of anxiety objectification when an intergroup public issue turns into a broader collective issue. At this stage, anxiety may explode into a mass movement of protest or open dispute on social media that may be witnessed and commented on freely. The ensuing process observed on social media is hyper-active interaction, wherein mutual exchanges of attack using various expressions of hatred are massively and openly conducted. This process becomes uncontrollable given the prevailing democratic climate that allows freedom of expression. However, the anxiety that changes into tension on the social media may end abruptly without reason, or when other new issues emerge and capture the attention of netizens.

The broadest and most extensive spiral of anxiety within the circle of communal anxiety may easily lead to mutual feelings among individuals in the community. This very feeling, subsequently, urges every communal member to be more aggressive in producing various messages that contain hatred. Such overflow of information or messages may be visualised as an explosive blast which will in turn generate a very specific psychological condition on social media. Netizens no longer have the opportunity to verify the accuracy of a given piece of information. This condition is considered unfavourable in creating a healthy information and democratic environment on social media, because netizens ultimately, tend to favour, select, read, spread, or produce information inclined to justify or strengthen their desired expectations based on their leaning toward a controversial issue or topic.

Respondent 3 shared that social media activities containing various expressions of hatred are highly intense, adding that this can be observed in the last Presidential Election which involved two groups of political supporters (Lim, 2017).

*“During the 2014 Presidential Election, two groups of presidential candidate supporters were taking turns defaming their rival candidate. This rivalry had actually emerged during the Regional Head Election (Gubernatorial-Researcher) of Jakarta in 2012. The intensity of various expressions of hatred appearing on social media naturally led to the creation of virtual groups. Netizens who felt they belonged to one group created a WhatsApp group. Within that WhatsApp group, various expressions of hatred were more freely distributed as the group members were like-minded individuals. They mutually strengthened their political beliefs. Under differing conditions, the various expressions of hatred also contained religious beliefs. For instance, “Takbir” (the saying of Allahu Akbar-Researcher) was mentioned as “take a beer” by a different group. Undoubtedly, these expressions of hatred had further reinforced group polarization based on political and religious beliefs. These various expressions of hatred often appeared and were redistributed widely because*

*internet-based communications has made it easier to retrieve or search and find related information to be subsequently disseminated again” (Respondent 3, February 2017).*

Such attitude leads to the polarisation of the online community that becomes easily segregated and divided on an issue or discourse. The divide is frequently based on communal proclivity instead of on the overall good of the society. These communal groups are often looked to as points of reference in determining type of feedback or opinion. This divide on social media, such as Twitter, may be seen as cyber war or conflict which can be searched and traced back to its previous or past roots. The advancement of online conversations or talks have led to what Zappavigna (2012) define as ‘searchable talk’. Various hate speeches from the past become searchable and may be reintroduced to support an opinion or weaken an opposing one. The enabling process of searching for online talks or conversations can be considered as the digital identity of social media, particularly on Twitter (Thomborrow, 2015; Warburton & Hatzipanagos, 2013; Murthy, 2013).

Various contents bearing expressions of hatred that are utilised in a twitwar may subsequently be reused in a closed group chat on other social media platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook. Tweets containing expressions of hatred on Twitter usually disregard various aspects relating to ethics, morality, and attitude and this could also influence chats or talks occurring in closed groups (James, 2014; McNeal & Holmes, 2016). Although a closed group such as a WhatsApp or Facebook group offers a more confined space for conversation compared to Twitter, an open social media, conversations that take place in the former may influence the emotions of the group members more.

As a result, feelings of resentment or rage become intensified due to the nature of information or message discussed among well-acquainted group members. Eventually, the confined and pent-up resentment emboldens the members to boldly convey his or her opinion through open media such as Twitter and Facebook. Such a process takes place repeatedly without any verification or correction. Thus, the rapid, extensive and repetitive posting of contents bearing expressions of hatred, without any verification or correction, will generate new meaning. Eventually, expressions of hatred becomes common as a form of criticism. Expressions of hatred no longer considered pejorative since they are regarded as carrying a positive meaning as a form of virtual criticism.

## CONCLUSION

In answering the research question with regard to the process by which expressions of hatred on Twitter can precipitate the formation of a spiral of anxiety on social media, the main finding shows that expressions of hatred pertaining to politics and religious beliefs conveyed via Twitter may trigger a twitwar. These various expressions of hatred would then be disseminated to other social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups. The expansive dissemination of hate speeches through social media may henceforth lead to a spiral of anxiety. The spiral of anxiety can affect any active and passive individual, on various social media platforms. At the personal anxiety circle, there are various implosive anxieties, i.e. anxieties that are suppressed, pent-up, or concealed within each person who experiences them. This form of personal anxiety may widen and expand as it is facilitated by the social media.

The expansion of personal anxiety will subsequently touch upon and enter the ensuing circles of anxiety, namely *group anxiety*, *intergroup anxiety*, and *communal anxiety*.

The encounter between an individual's personal anxiety and others' on social media continues to expand and become group anxiety, which will then eventually reach the last circle of communal anxiety. Anxieties that enter the communal circle may result in explosive anxiety, i.e. anxiety that is expressed externally in various forms ranging from expressions of hatred to mass protest. Such communal anxiety may widen and expand further because every individual active on social media tends to search, find, save, produce, and share information according to the personal anxiety one feels or experiences. The spiral of anxiety's expansion process on social media is preceded by information warfare on social media involving various political interests and religious beliefs. This demonstrates that netizens in Indonesia possess acute sensitivity to various issues of political identity and religiosity.

The findings of this study may have implications on the shift of various concepts relating to the construction of reality influenced by activities on social media. Additionally, the research findings may also affect regulations concerning freedom of expression in democratic countries, such as Indonesia. Hence, it is suggested that while democratic states such as Indonesia should ensure their citizens' freedom of expression, they should also have mechanisms in place to prevent or control the delivery of potential expressions of hatred. Subsequent studies can, thus, explore how social construct is formed based on social media activities or how freedom of speech on social media may threaten democracy.

This study, undoubtedly, has a number of limitations. One of its main limitations is the fact that many of the Twitter accounts spreading hatred on social media are anonymous accounts (pseudonymous accounts). For that reason, this study employed a qualitative approach by conducting in-depth interviews with four authentic accounts that are active on social media, thereby inadvertently forgoing a number of anonymous accounts that could not be interviewed. Thus, it is suggested that future studies obtain more participants who are directly involved in creating and disseminating expressions of hatred on social media and those who passively receive them. In addition, some of the owners of the anonymous accounts spreading hatred on social media refused when requested for an interview. Hence, the biggest obstacle of this study is the significant amount of hate-mongering anonymous accounts that objected to being interviewed. Some of them in fact seemed apprehensive when approached with an interview request.

Another limitation of this study is its very specific focus. This research focuses on the activities of social media users in relation to contents bearing expressions of hatred involved in *twitwar* that may form a spiral of anxiety. Thus, subsequent research can perhaps focus more on broader closed groups because the activities of closed groups found on WhatsApp, Twitter, or Facebook are uninhibited for conveying various expressions of hatred, particularly those directed toward groups of dissenting political views.

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