

WATTPAD AS A STORY-SHARING WEBSITE Is it a field of literary production?

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Abstract

This article investigates the existence of Wattpad as a cyber-platform to produce literary works through socio-cultural paradigm. By adopting Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, the discussion is intended to further elaborate whether such a story-sharing website – firstly launched in 2006 – has some typical natures as the field of literary production. The objective of this study is to explore how currently the influence of technological reformation is toward the practice of literary production. Eventually, from the exploration conducted to Wattpad, it is found that there are some typical characteristics that bring consideration to see it as a field of literary production. However, those characteristics must be seen contextually for it is conditioned in cyber space, yet the logic of conventional practice is carried over into it.

Keywords: Wattpad, Bourdieu, cyber space, field, literary production

Introduction

The massive advancement of technology has now brought very significant behavioral changing toward society all around the world. In the context of Indonesian social interaction, the influence of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, You Tube, Twitter, etc, is very significant. Based on social media overview – conducted by We Are Social Institute – in January 2019 [1], the total number of active social media users in Indonesia are 150 million, that is included 130 million who access social media via mobile devices. If it is surface assumed, without thoroughly consider multiple accounts owned by an individual, we can see that around 56% out of Indonesian total population have now interacted at cyber social space. A condition that influences socio-cultural activities, including the production of literary work.

In the history of Indonesian literature, cyber literature has been known since two decades ago. Roekminto [2] explains that the first Indonesian internet literary site namely *cybersastra.net* was established in 1999 by poets Nanang Suryadi, Yono Wardito and Donny Anggoro, then followed by uncountable number of literary sites afterwards. Since then, many discourses

about cyber literature in Indonesia started to develop not only among litterateurs, but also public in general. Nevertheless, he also believes that there was no such a significant distinction between cyber literary works and conventional works – published in newspapers and magazines – because cyber literature failed to offer its special characteristic but medium of expression. Therefore, Indonesian cyber literature in the previous decade only transferred the conventional way writing into internet, without giving any significant change upon the substance of works produced.

Since the early of 21st century, the social media as platform for global social interaction has been developed in various types and functions. Different with platforms that have been mentioned previously, in the domain of literature or creative writing people are now familiar with a story-sharing website namely “*WATTPAD*”. Established in 2006 by Allen Lau and Ivan Yuen, after 13 years long development has brought Wattpad as the biggest reading and writing in the world, with social community reaching more than 70 million users in a month, and more than 565 million original stories uploaded [3]. Beside it offers readers around the world to access any

preferable literary genre available for free, Wattpad also provides space for both professional and amateur writers to actualize their interest in writing novel, short story or poetry anthology, then publish their works – even though Wattpad is not intended as publishing platform – to readers all around the world without passing through the complexity of traditional publishing systems. Furthermore, this platform also provides feature that enables asynchronous communication between writer and readers, so that typical interaction that commonly exist in other kind of social media can also be created among the users.

The existence of Wattpad is relatively well-known so far among scholars. It is proven by some studies that have been conducted upon it. Stephanie Benzaquen-Gautier [4] for example investigates stories that talk about the Holocaust based on their intrinsic elements and tries to understand their impact on reader according to gender construction and facts in the past. She also analyzes external materials such as history, fiction and writing that possibly influence the materialization of those Holocaust stories and the impact of online platform like Wattpad in shaping digital participatory culture. Miriam J. Johnson [5] – even though not specifically talk about Wattpad – scrutinizes the relation among genre fiction, digital social platform, citizen author and citizen authors' strategy to alter power relationship in the industry. The study results conclusion showing that digital space has stimulated many production of genre writings that causes a shifting power dynamics between citizen authors who prefer to work in it and traditional publishing industry, blurs distinction between high and low art, and glorifies gender issue. While Arif Budi Mawardi [6] studies the macro phenomenon in Indonesian context related to commodification of digital literary works from Wattpad into printed works through Independent (Indie) publishers. Based on his study, it is found that many Indonesian Wattpad's authors are not satisfied with their popularity in cyber space, therefore they try to

gain more capital by publishing their works in printed form.

According to those studies, we can see that Wattpad has become a social space where authors can freely explore any story genre that they prefer to write and resist the hegemony of traditional publishing system, or even gain popularity as a form of social capital. However, the fact that Indonesian Wattpad's authors still crave on more capital from the real life leaves some socio-cultural questions upon the existence of Wattpad as cyber or digital field of literary production in Indonesia: a. *“Does it really give ideal legitimation for its authors as literary men?”* And prior to that, we need to know b. *“Does it have typical criteria as the field of literary production?”*.

Here, further investigation is needed to get better understanding about Wattpad as a social space for literary production. Such a study is beneficial for revealing how far is the influence of technological advancement to the dynamics of socio-cultural aspect, especially literature, in Indonesia. In order to answer those questions, in this particular study, Wattpad as a story-sharing website will be investigated through Bourdieu's theoretical framework to see whether it has typical criteria to be considered as field of literary production.

Methodology

Before coming to data collecting and analyzing part, Faruk [7] believes that researcher must determine both material and formal objects in their study. Material object is the domain where a research is conducted, while formal object is the perspective taken to examine the material object. In this study, Wattpad as story sharing website is taken as the material object, while the formal objects are all typical elements that can possibly construct Wattpad as a field of literary production, and give legitimation for its authors to be recognized as literary men. The data for this study are some relevant qualitative materials from Wattpad itself, such as texts from home page, discover page,

community page, etc. Besides, the data are also taken from previous research, some reviews and testimonies about Wattpad that are found in the internet. All data are compiled altogether by conducting digital observation and archiving method. Afterwards, those data are selected and classified based on the needs of the research in order to answer questions that have already formulated previously.

In analyzing the data, this study adapts Bourdieu's way [7, pp 16] in analyzing levels of related social realities as follow:

1. Analyzing data that contain information about typical works, literary producers and their practice in this kind of social media platform;
2. Relating the result of first analysis to all data that inform the structure of Wattpad as cyber space for social interaction, where each literary agent competes to gain legitimation in that space;
3. Relating the result of second analysis to all data that inform the position of Wattpad as social space compared to other kind of social space, in order to prove the level of legitimation gotten by Wattpad's literary agent.

Findings and Discussion

To make it well structured, this part will be divided into three level of discussion. *First*, as the beginning of discussion, this paper will discuss the basic concept of field of literary production in order to give frame of thought in understanding all findings gotten from this study. *Second*, Wattpad as the material object will be analyzed to see whether or not this platform can be considered as a field of literary production that provides some sort of ideal legitimation toward authors who practice in this cyber space. Now, we will start with Bourdieu and his concept of literary field.

Bourdieu and Field of Literary Production

The field of literary production as a term is very close to Pierre Bourdieu who has developed genetic sociology or genetic

structuralism theory to examine the socio-cultural dynamics of literary production. Furthermore, Bourdieu [8] then explicitly states that “*the genetic structuralism I propose is designed to understand both the genesis of social structures – the literary field – and the genesis of dispositions of the habitus of the agents who are involved in these structures*”. Therefore genetic structuralism à la Bourdieu is a combination between an analysis of objective social structure and an analysis of genesis of the socially constituted mental structure, internalized into particular individuals, which results practice.

Generally, this theory tries to answer every problem including social conditions of production, circulation and consumption of symbolical goods, in which literary work is attached inside. Therefore the context of studies related to this theory includes:

1. The exploration upon work producers in terms of their strategies and trajectories, based on their individual and class habitus, as well as their objective position within a field;
2. Analysis of field's structure (position of the writers or artists), consecration and legitimation which make cultural products as they are (public, publisher, critics, gallery, academy, etc.);
3. Analysis of field's position, such as cultural field, in a broader field of power such as economy, politic, etc.

The science of literary field, according to Bourdieu, is a kind of sites analysis that determines every position is subjectively defined by distinctive properties system that shows one position can be situated among others. Furthermore, Bourdieu sees literary field as ‘*field of force*’, along with ‘*field of struggle*’ that tends to transform or conserve this field of force. This field is formed by objective relations based upon different positions the agents possess during struggle to defend or improve their position. At the end, the strategy used for that struggle depends on force and occupied position of agents in the power relations.

The structure of field itself is seen as space of positions, as structure of capital distribution of specific properties that supports to succeed in the field and win the external profit (financial) or specific profit (prestige). The structure of a field, in that specific sense, is determined by positions of agents in that particular field, whereas the changing position of agent will also change the structural order of the field. Therefore in every field, agents are always involved in struggling to take over authority, the authority in a form of legitimation, consecration and prestige. Eventually that will influence the correspondence between two homologous structures, which are the structure of works and the structure of cultural field.

Regarding to its position and structure, cultural field such as literary field is believed to exist in a subordinate or dominated position within the field of power [8],[9] for it possesses high degree symbolic forms of capital but it is lack of economic capital. That is because the legitimacy in field of power determined by the possession of economic or political capital. The field of power itself is defined by Bourdieu [9] as “*the space of relations of force between agents or between institutions having in common the possession of capital necessary to occupy the dominant positions in different fields (notably economic or cultural)*”. It is the site of struggles between the holders of different power (e.g. artists and patron) that determines the transformation or conservation of different capitals’ relative value, as it also determines related forces to be engaged in these struggles.

Related to that, the structure of cultural production field is formed by an opposition between two sub-fields: ‘the field of restricted production’ and ‘the field of large scale production’. The first sub-field refers to production of what is called as high art (e.g. ‘serious literature’), where the competition between agents is merely symbolical that involves prestige, consecration and artistic celebrity. Meanwhile the second sub-field refers to so called as ‘mass’ or ‘popular’

culture (e.g. mass-produced literature), in which it relies on a large and complex culture industry and economic capital based hierarchy. Although its nature is different with the field of restricted production, in Bourdieu’s view the field of large scale production tends to adopt the spirit and dynamics from restricted field in order to renew (or improve) itself.

Therefore from those explanation, it can be seen that there are four assumptions about literary field in the perspective of Bourdieu’s genetic structuralism, as follow:

1. Literary field is – a space of position – formed by objective relation among different positions that its agents occupy, thus its structural dynamics is related to the dynamics of agents position;
2. Thus, literary field is a dynamic structural system that must be understood structurally, in relation to the probability of agents’ position changing that can also change the structural order of literary field;
3. The structure of literary field is also formed by an opposition between two sub-field, ‘*the field of restricted production*’ and ‘*the field of large scale production*’;
4. The structure of literary work is homologous with the structure of literary field, for it is believed that an agents’ position and struggle in the field is the origin of literary structure they create.

Wattpad and Possibility as Field of Literary Production

According to previous explanation, the core points to see whether Wattpad has proper criteria to be considered as a field of literary production lie on Bourdieu’s basic assumptions about literary field that have been comprehensively explained previously. In the lens of Bourdieu, social spaces – including literary field – is constructed by agents’ position and their objective relation. Objective relation in this case is in a form of

binary opposition between the dominant and the subordinate, which shows a literary field is preserved through a mode of power relation inside.

Although it shows identical activities as in the real world, the situation found in Wattpad is entirely different with the condition of literary production in the real life. *Firstly*, unlike what happen in the context of traditional publishing, there is no barrier to publish a work of an individual in Wattpad, and *secondly*, every step of publication processes, such as selecting-processing-distributing, can be managed by the author itself, so that the role of agency, patron and publisher is no longer relevant in here. Seemingly, this platform provides a high level of independence toward the authors in expressing what they want to write. However, as Mawardi [6] shows in his study, the readers can be – as long as consented by the authors – the authoritative agents who control what must and must not be written by the authors, since Wattpad gives feature between writers and readers to interact each other.

Furthermore, Mawardi also explains that most of authors in Wattpad are beginner in literary or even writing field. Therefore if their orientation is to gain popularity and existence, it sounds logical if the writers try to accommodate what becomes the willingness of the readers to grab as much followers and likes as they can. It shows that Wattpad users is just like in other platform of social media. But the most important point in this issue is a potential of readers to become the taste controller upon works produced in this kind of social media. So it seems that the role of readers is more superior compared to authors who just try to serve the demand of their followers or readers.

In the other side, the relation between dominant and subordinate author can just be more appropriate if converted as popular and newcomer author. This perception is relatively taken due to the fact that there is no room for popular authors to intervene or slow down the struggle of the newcomers to get more and more incentives, such as followers-

likes-viewers, from their practice as literary agent in Wattpad. If in the real world the dominant agents have interest to conserve their position, in Wattpad as long as they write something acceptable then everybody can get popularity.

Thus, if literary field is a dynamic structural system where the probability of agents' position changing can also change the structural order of its field, it is a little bit problematic to see Wattpad as social space that Bourdieu believes in. It is not because there is no probability of authors' position changing, but although the authors have reached popularity, it is almost impossible for them to avoid someone new to get popularity even higher than they do. The only struggle they do is just being more and more productive along with supplying the demand of the readers in Wattpad. The popular one is indeed visible due to the rank features and awards provided by the platform, but the authority seemingly belongs to the readers.

Regarding to the structure of literary field is also formed by an opposition between two sub-field, '*the field of restricted production*' and '*the field of large scale production*'. It is also problematic to categorize Wattpad in one of those two sub-field, or even claim that it contains such a polarization inside. It is because the characteristic of Wattpad cannot be identically matched with either restricted or large scale. If it is extremely necessary to choose one of them, maybe the nature of large scale production is the closer one compared to restricted production. After all, if the parameter of large scale production is counted from the width of readers' access, every work in Wattpad is accessible worldwide. Nevertheless, the free access nature of Wattpad then again backlashes the nature of large scale production, as a complex culture industry and economic capital based hierarchy. In this digital field, economic capital seems not that relevant to be converted as any capital available in the field. Both readers and writers can put themselves in practice without necessarily have economic capital based.

Eventually, a basic assumption that says the structure of literary work is homologous with the structure of literary field can be seen logical in this case. As explained previously, it is believed that an agent's position and struggle in the field is the origin of literary structure they create. That notion can explain the practice of each author in the platform, in which the more popular an author is, the more acceptable the work he/she creates in the lens of the readers. That can also be seen the other way round, in which the less popular an author is, the less acceptable the work he/she creates. So the structure of the literary works produced in Wattpad correspond to the structure of the space due to the position occupied by each author inside.

Wattpad as a Source of Capitals and Legitimation

Regardless the peculiar nature of Wattpad as social space where people produce literary works, there is an interesting findings related to the function of this social media as a source of capitals. Related to literary agent's practice at literary field, the discussion will be related to what Bourdieu calls as capital. In a simple way, capital can be understood as a set of force and power resources that can be used by agents to deal with field of literature. In this case, Bourdieu [10],[11] categorizes capital into four types:

1. Economic capital that covers production tools, material and money. Economic capital can also be reversed or patented as individual right. This is a relatively independent capital for it can be easily used or transformed into another field, also flexible to be given or inherited to somebody else;
2. Cultural capital as a holistic intellectual qualification that can be produced through formal education or family tradition. This kind of capital implies a long process of learning, so that it cannot be so easy given to somebody else;

3. Social capital or social networking possessed by agents in relation to other agents that have power;
4. Symbolic capital in a form of accumulated prestige, status, authority and legitimation.

Nonetheless, there are two paramount capital considered in the field of cultural production [8], which are symbolic capital as combination between agent's knowledge and recognition before other agents, and cultural capital as a form of cultural knowledge, competences and disposition. In this context, when the agents have come into a field, then all of their capitals have already automatically invested to gain more capitals from the involvement to that particular field. General logics to be used in this case is that none of them want to get lost from the game they play in that field. Therefore, the orientation of an agent to come to a field is certainly to gain profit (either symbolical or economical), to win it, not the opposite. The practice of producing literary work, in this case, is the manifestation of how an agent fights to struggle and gain some profit in the literary field.

This discussion is closely related to Mawardi's [6] explanation about the commodification of Indonesian Wattpad's works into printed form with ISBN. According to him, in this practice Wattpad authors prefer to work with independent (indie) publishers due to easiness they can get compared to work a lot harder to convince major publishers. However, it is found that there are some authors who are well-recognized by major publisher, even their works are ready to be enjoyed via silver screen. In year 2019 [12], there are eight Wattpad works listed to be filmed, as follow: Wulanfadi's *Matt and Mou*, Faradita's *Sin* and *Invalidite*, Wiwi Syanti's *She's the Boss*, Alnira's *Friendzone*, Eko Ivano Winata's *Senior*, Almira Bastari's *Resign* and Luluk HF's *Mariposa*. Besides that, there are also some works that have already been filmed so far [13], they are Erisca Febriani's *Dear*

Nathan and *Serendipity*, Wulanfadi's *A*, Christa Bella's *Revan & Reina* and Indah Riyana's *The Perfect Husband*.

Those phenomena show that Wattpad is also used by its users to accumulate some capitals that can be used outside of Wattpad as cyber space. There are two capitals that are identified in this matter: social capital and cultural capital. From this study, it can be seen that cultural capital as a holistic intellectual qualification cannot only be produced through formal education or family tradition. As a capital that is accumulated through a long process of learning, those Wattpad's authors have successfully used this platform as a space for learning by doing the skill of writing that is widely demanded by the readers, even beyond Wattpad. While social capital or social networking possessed by them in relation to other agents that have power in Wattpad space, who are readers themselves. It can be clearly seen that Wattpad has been used to collect social capital in a form of followers and fanatic readers that can eventually be brought beyond cyber space.

In the context of conventional publishing system, social and cultural capital are crucial in gaining economic capital. It is proven by society reception toward Wattpad's authors who eventually publish their works conventionally [14]–[16]. It means that, the social and cultural capital gotten from cyber social space can be converted into economic capital in the real life. Another interesting finding from Mawardi's study is that a trend of fetishism from fanatic followers toward Wattpad's popular authors. He sees that in some extent, reading is no longer relevant to be the reason for those followers to buy the printed version of Wattpad's popular stories. It is more as life style instead of the necessity of reading, because if they crave of reading, they've got it for free before those authors expand their practice to the world beyond cyber space. At this level, the relation between authors and readers has reversed. In the early time of their writing career, those authors are dominated by demanding readers,

once they have accumulated sufficient capitals, the readers are softly dominated to help the authors accumulating much more capitals beyond cyber space.

Ironically, regardless the popularity gotten by those popular authors, they are still weak in the term of symbolic capital. As a capital in a form of accumulated prestige, status, authority and legitimation, symbolic capital is the most powerful weapon for any literary man to have ideal legitimation in the field of literary production. As Wattpad cannot be categorized as restricted scale sub-field, the final legitimation that this field can give to its agent is just popularity. There is no such a prestige, status or even authority provided by Wattpad to its Indonesian most important writers, as long as the authoritative agents belongs to Indonesian field of literary production do not see Wattpad as impactful platform that fits with the ideal taste those agents have constructed and conserved so far. Probably that is one of reasons for Wattpad's popular authors to go beyond cyber space and dare to struggle in wider space that offers more ideal legitimation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, according to all findings discussed previously, there are some points of view that must be re-emphasized as the last part of the discussion in this paper as follow:

1. As social media platform that support the production of cyber literature, Wattpad has peculiar characteristic as a social space, since this short observation cannot clearly be matched with Bourdieu's concept of field, it needs deeper and more comprehensive study to explain it as a field of literary production;
2. Wattpad is a source of social and cultural capitals that can be maximally obtained by its popular authors, so that they can bring it out and converted as economic capital;
3. Wattpad is unable to provide any symbolic capital that causes this space

is lack of legitimation to be given to their popular authors;

4. Wattpad's popular authors then presumably try to expand their practice for getting more capital and ideal legitimation as literary man in the field of Indonesian literature.

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