

# Digital 'Taboo' Storytelling

Wildan Namora Ichsan Setiawan<sup>1</sup>, Dela Restania Andhika<sup>2</sup>, Lisa Mardiana<sup>3</sup>,  
Hastri Raras Respati<sup>4</sup>  
{wildannamora@gmail.com<sup>1</sup>, dela.restania@gmail.com<sup>2</sup>, lisamardiana.lm@gmail.com<sup>3</sup>,  
hastriraras@gmail.com<sup>4</sup>}

International Institute of Information Technology Bangalore, India<sup>1</sup>  
Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia<sup>2</sup>  
Universitas Dian Nuswantoro, Indonesia<sup>1,3</sup>  
Universitas Tidar, Indonesia<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract.** Digital storytelling as one of the innovations in the disruptive era that strengthens the culture transfer. The using of technology as a medium for sharing stories is one of the right choices. As a powerful distribution tool, it can reach various groups in all corners of the world. There are differences among western and eastern countries so, storytelling does not only share the richness of tales but also culture. Wattpad is one of the most widely accessed digital storytelling platforms in Indonesia. Moreover, as a technology that comes from western countries, Wattpad also contains western cultures in it, one of them is the LGBT movement. Usually, for some eastern countries, this culture is taboo, especially in Indonesia. However, on this platform appears the different interactions emerge about LGBT. Indonesian Wattpad users read and produce these taboo stories. There is also a virtual conversation among users about this content that can be accessed publicly through the comment's column. This research attempts to describe the cyberculture of Indonesian users on Wattpad by using virtual ethnography methods. The findings of this study are descriptions of taboo cultural phenomena on Wattpad's platform through four levels of Cybermedia Analysis those are Media Space, Media Archive, Media Object, and Experiential Stories.

**Keywords:** Digital Storytelling, LGBT, Virtual Ethnography, Cyberculture, Wattpad

## 1 Introduction

The disruption era portrays the changes of general rules that occur in society causes new innovation comes. One of innovation that currently develop is digital storytelling. There are a lot of discussion that utilize this innovation in several sectors like education, health promotion, journalism, art, etc. Digital storytelling utilizes digital media as the tool to tell, with some elements like text, picture, video, and sound. The occurring of internet that gives wide reach throughout the world, digital storytelling content can reach more audiences. As the innovation in the disruption era, digital storytelling can transfer culture [1][2].

According to some experts' opinions that there are perspectives regarding the communication process between western and eastern culture [3]. Western culture honor rationality that appears some equality movements, one of them is LGBT. The LGBT term is wider than the previous and those are only Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender, currently is added with Queer. Based on Association for LGBT Issues in Counselling of Alabama [4] Queer is the name for those who categorizes onto minority sexual. This topic is commonly occurring

in western culture, but it will be different when it is discussed in eastern countries, one of them is Indonesia.

With a lot of diversities, LGBT becomes something taboo in this country. It can be seen from a news that there is a raid to the house which is suspected a place for LGBT [5] gathering, officially declining a film showing from region government, because they are afraid that its work can engage people to be part of LGBT [6]. It is not only occurred in common society, but also to the civil servants [7] related to the firing that is suspected relates to his sexual orientations, also to the celebrity [8]. Beside the literature work relates to LGBT, on online media they get critique from a state university [9]. The last news shows, LGBT becomes a topic that relates to the digital storytelling.

There are lot of stories contain LGBT themed in some digital storytelling platforms, one of them is Wattpad. This online writing platform that currently becomes online media storytelling with 80 million users consist of readers and writers [10]. Wattpad is a user-generated content platform [11], where user can publish their fiction story (or non-fiction), and other users can read it on desktop or mobile. As a platform comes from western country, Wattpad also supports LGBT by creating official account with username @LGBT that exist since 2015 [12]. Wattpad as a company brings LGBT to a broader audience by use of their strong culture transfer platform [12][13][14][15]. Many supports and cooperation done by Wattpad through this account as their support to LGBT community. One of Wattpad's support is creating official account of LGBT for each country. The support from Wattpad also come into Indonesia by creating account named @LGBTIna.

This account as a place for contents with LGBT themed in Indonesia that join since 2015 [16]. The fact is, although it is something taboo, there are users' activities with topic discussion relate to LGBT in this account. One of the massive activities is started from earlier 2019, this account @LGBTIna creates a contest named Valentines' Day 2019, a literature work contest that is also held in some countries. This contest obliges the users to use hashtag #ValentineContest2019, then there are three winners in this account @LGBTIna [17]. One of work that becomes a winner entitled Riak Kalbu by a user @Abiyasha. Besides wins the contest, @Abiyasha also publishes some works with Gay themed to the printed version and those are sold in Indonesia. Those facts above show instead in offline there are taboo arguments towards LGBT, but in online, shows a lot of different interactions, moreover in digital storytelling platform. Because of that, this research describes how the interactions of Wattpad users relate to the digital storytelling with taboo theme.

## **2 Methodology**

This research uses a qualitative descriptive design to describe the interactions that exist on the Wattpad digital storytelling platform. Virtual ethnographic methods are used in Digital Research 'Taboo' Storytelling because subjects and objects depend on virtual environments. Virtual ethnography becomes a choice in order to elaborate on how digital storytelling with taboo themed, which is popular in a digital platform, Wattpad. Hine [18] stated that it is on the internet means that it should be viewed seriously as the cultural site that offers a place for the researcher to deeply understand the activity that has broad social meaning occurs. Virtual ethnography itself means as the tool to problematization in internet using [19]. This methodology is used to research the internet and explore the user (entity) when using internet

technology [18][19]. Hine [18] also argued that the experience in virtual space has relation with offline space.

Interaction between users and the activities of writers and readers on the Wattpad platform can be called as cyber culture. Nasrullah [20] described cyber culture as a social practice, as well as the values of communication and interaction between users that arise in cyberspace from the relationship between humans and technology and between humans and technology intermediaries. The culture is produced, distributed, and consumed through the internet and networks formed among users. Meanwhile, what he meant with cyberspace, in this case, Nasrullah [21] summarized it as a conceptual space where all words, human relations, data, welfare, and strength are manifested by everyone through CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication) technology. CMC is a concept of space where human relations, data, power, words, and so on occur through computer intermediaries connected.

Virtual ethnography as the new approach to see the culture and cultural artefacts in the virtual space, to elaborate it Nasrullah offered Cyber Media Analysis Method [21]. This method is divided into four level analysis, those are Media Space, Media Document, Media Object, and Experiential Stories [21]. The level of Media Space studies about media tools that used by user, from structure, setting, performance to technically using procedure, where the culture occurs. The level of Media Document talks about media content, meaning to the text/graphic as the cultural artefacts. Nasrullah [21] used six keywords that formulated by Mitra and Cohen [22] in order to see the Media Document, they are Intertextuality, Nonlinearity, A Blurring of the Reader of Writer Distinction, Multimediality, Globalness, and Ephemerality. Practically in this level, researcher describes texts from cultural artefacts that produced or exchanged among users. The Media Document becomes the start to know how cultural occurs, because the text becomes the focus from this research that use virtual ethnography [21].

The next level is media object which focus on the interaction that occur in cyberspace. If in the level of media document, the researcher only focusses on the text from content producer, in media object, the researcher sees how the context is responded or there is interaction with other users [21]. The last level is analyzing to the motive, effect, or reality that connected through online or offline or it can be called as the level of media space [21]. In this level, Nasrullah [21] concluded that what happens in the internet or online, actually is close enough with the reality (offline). It means that, the online users' activities cannot avoid from the offline life users.

Nasrullah [21] also mentioned that in ethnography, culture, and culture artefacts is the main focus. Further explained that culture is interpreted as values that exist between the community and cultural artefacts are a manifestation of these values.

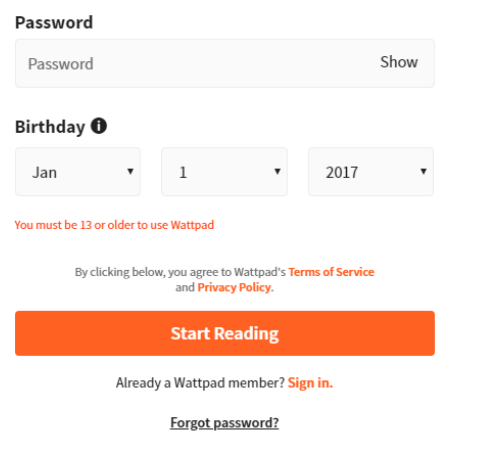
Data is taken from the Wattpad platform in the form of work pages, text, user comments, blogs, until terms & conditions of use. The selected work in this study is Riak Kalbu. This paper became one of the champions in the LGBT-themed writing contest in Wattpad. @Abiyasha is the account writer Riak Kalbu and has written several other works until it is published in physical book form. Virtual interview with the author @Abiyasha via email and Wattpad chat facility. Online news media readings were also carried out to support this research.

### **3 Findings and Discussion**

This paper presents the findings and discussion through four subsections, which are Media Space, Media Document, Media Object and Experiential Stories.

### 3.1 Media Space

Wattpad is a storytelling platform using digital media. Digital media or new media [20] according to Buckingham [23], is part of the convergence among interactive media, online networks, and existing forms of media. Wattpad has various facilities that support its users to write stories, comment, express opinions as without limits. Multiple topics, including LGBT, develop freely in this platform. The most visible limitation for users is the age requirement [24]. Besides being listed in the Wattpad regulations [24] this age limit also appears in the Wattpad registration form as in Figure 1 [25].



The image shows a registration form for Wattpad. It includes a 'Password' field with a 'Show' button, a 'Birthday' section with three dropdown menus for month (Jan), day (1), and year (2017), and a red warning message: 'You must be 13 or older to use Wattpad'. Below this is a link to 'Terms of Service and Privacy Policy', an orange 'Start Reading' button, and links for 'Sign in' and 'Forgot password?'.

**Fig. 1.** Wattpad Age Requirement.

Interactivity is emphasised on the digital media with following characteristics: (1) being decentralised and produced by users (many to many or many to few), (2) is two-way communication, (3) is outside the state's control, (4) democratisation, (5) promoting individual awareness, and (6) is individual-oriented [3][26]. In level of media space, Wattpad is going to be seen from characterise as the new media, those are:

a. Wattpad being decentralised and produced by users.

Wattpad is a platform that use term of User Generated Content [27], it means that content of this platform, such as text, images, video and audio is produced by user. In other words, user have freedom to make their content by themselves without any bordered. It also included the content with LGBT themed which the fact is fully supported by Wattpad, like giving official account until many cooperation with companies or certain brands, the latest one is T-Mobile [28].

b. Wattpad facilitate two-way communication

Besides private message feature, there is comments section on the story field, which can use to give feedback on a story. The users can give the comment in line by line of the paragraph and 'conversation' menu on every user account, which can use as a place to chit chat with other users that can be friends, readers or other writers who want to get in touch.

c. Outside the state's control

Indonesia as known as a country that prohibit LGBT. The government also take the action towards contents, communities, or digital media which contain this element. Like the Major of Depok who appeal the society to report every activity of LGBT [29] until create a rule based on

it [30]. There is also closing one of account in social media Instagram because of producing LGBT content [31]. This account is officially closed by Instagram after has been asked by Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo) according to the society's reports. According to this situation which is different with it, the free variety of content in Wattpad, includes LGBT category, it shows that there is no control from government.

d. Wattpad supports democratisation

Wattpad makes username as the main name and they also prohibit to show the private data of the users [32]. If those who already been 13 years old or older [24], they can get free access to Wattpad. Besides Wattpad's support towards LGBT community, the users' safety also shows that this platform is a place for those who want to write and read whatever they want and share them until give comments to others.

e. Wattpad on promoting individual awareness

Wattpad have various campaigns on their platform one of them relates with LGBTQ+. The instance of this campaign is when pride month coming [13]. Here, Wattpad engage the writers to celebrate this pride month through creating a work with LGBTQ+ themed. Besides that, in this campaign the users are also engaged to read and share the existing stories. In this occasion, Wattpad also have a cooperation with International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA) to empower LGBTQ+ Youth around the world. It can be stated as portrayal of new media to promote individual awareness about certain topic, here relates with LGBT.

f. Individual-oriented

Every reader or writer in Wattpad, has a right of his own account. They also have a right to choose stories they want to read. Even Wattpad already have removed private stories feature [33] which is usually used by writers to hide adult content and make a require to the readers to follow them first to get the access.

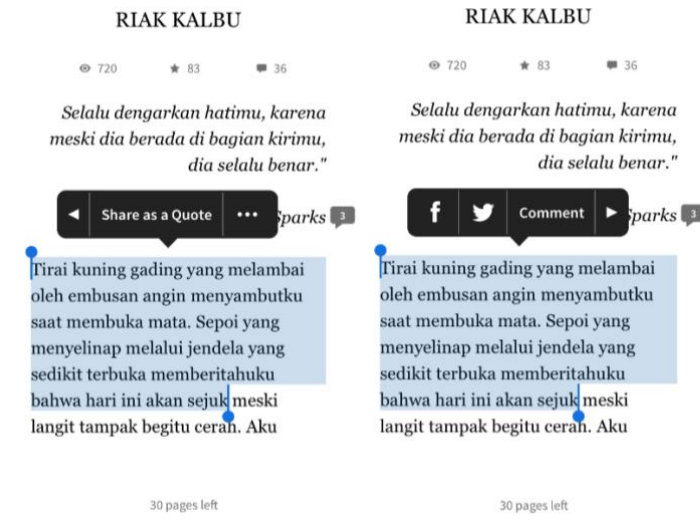
Through this analysis, it can be seen that Wattpad fulfil criteria for new media characteristics.

### **3.2 Media Document**

The main content in Wattpad is in storytelling text, with fully multimedia facilities like picture/photo, video, and audio. Thus, cultural artifacts that appears more dominated by text and then other contents which attached on the work sheet, or emoticon on comments column.

One of criterion which make the winner of Valentine Day wins the contest is suitable with inspirational quotation given [34]. Thus, the values that contained in the story which follow this contest surely related to those quotations. Riak Kalbu quoted sentence from Nicholas Sparks "Always listen to your heart, because even though it's on your left side, it's always right". Then @Abiyasha translates through the doubt of the main character towards his feeling. Beside that the contests in @LGBTIna is always inclusive on the characters and stories of LGBTQ+ [34]. The writer chooses Gay as the background character, so in the story shows a couple of gay and another man who is the ex-boyfriend.

Technically, Wattpad already have disabled the function of copy/paste [35][36]. Thus, when the users block some words or sentences, the feature that will appear are sharing Facebook, Twitter, and Quotes for mobile application users, and sharing Facebook for users who access through desktop.



**Fig. 2.** Sharing Quotes Feature.

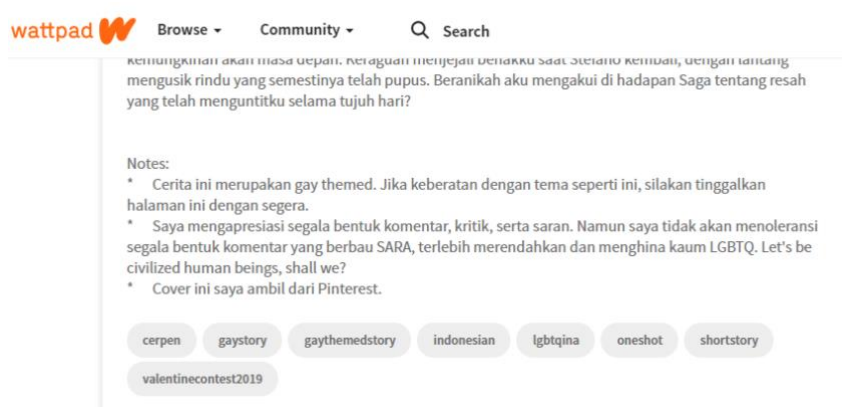
Sharing Quotes feature (Figure 2) [37] gives facility for readers to quote the writers' words that can be shared. The share button will be appearing part of story which has been quoted, the title, and the writer's account that will be shared (Figure 3) [37].



**Fig. 3.** Sharing Quotes Feature Appearance.

Wattpad is a place for writers and readers where all people can access it. The writers and readers can choose the category that they want. In the content of Riak Kalbu, which join the

Valentine Day contest that held by official account of Wattpad LGBT Indonesia. Beside on its profile page of the writer @Abiyasha, Riak Kalbu also appears in highlight of account @LGBTIna. In this content the writer gives warning/notification to the readers that has gay themed. Although indirectly it is specifying this work to the certain entity, which means that the work can be read by all users. However, @Abiyasha gives notes that the users who object to the gay themed will be please to leave the story. Besides, Abiyasha also do not give any tolerance for those who comment relates with ethnicity, religion, race, and among communities (SARA), moreover those who humiliate LGBT community. Here he appeals the users to be civilised human being. It is a cultural artefact that realise cultural value which is built by Wattpad in a community account of LGBT that they manage.



**Fig. 4.** Hashtag on Riak Kalbu.

Hashtag becomes cultural artifact in Wattpad. In the Riak Kalbu, Abiyasha uses some hashtags (Figure 4) [37] like: cerpen, gaystory, gaythemedstory, Indonesia, lgbtina, oneshot, shortstory, and hashtag valentinedaycontest2019 which is mandatory tag in this contest. Gaystory and gaythemedstory hashtag become clear artifacts about values in Riak Kalbu.

Then talk about power relation, the writers can write and share their stories, and also have fully access. Thus, only the writers who can edit it. The readers can give comment in comment column, but not always the feedback given will be implemented.

### 3.3 Media Object

Interactivity becomes the most giving attention in the new media platform. Wattpad facilitate two ways communication between writer and reader in story page through comments column feature, conversation menu, and private message. Conversation in comments column and conversation menu can be seen by other users, which is different with private message that only visible for users to send messages each other [38]. In the level of media object there are lots discussion between @Abiyasha as a writer and with his readers through comments column.



Fig. 5. Comment from @chechesyarifahakim.

The readers can leave comment in text and emoticon animation with mobile version of Wattpad. Like on Figure 5 [37] @chechesyarifahakim who leaves her impression towards the story entitled Riak Kalbu. In the comment given, @chechesyarifahakim puts some emoticons which is dominated heart sign, and started with the praise. Besides that, there are prayers that delivered by readers to @Abiyasha then replied by the writer.



Fig. 6. Account of @chechesyarifahakim, share tag another user.

The similar account (Figure 6) [37] also share his experience in reading LGBT digital storytelling through tag feature to other Wattpad users, he is @althafjr. Besides sharing, among users can interact each other in comments column, so there is no limitation between reader and writer.



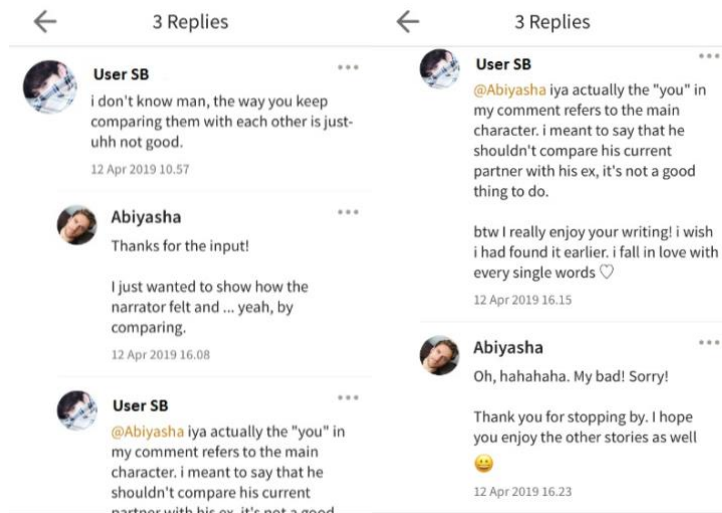


Fig. 7. Conversation between User SB with @Abiyasha.

@Abiyasha as the writer also gives some responds to the reader who criticise him. In Figure 7 [37] account User SB criticise relates to the main character in the story. User SB discusses the behaviour of the main character who compares his current partner, Saga, with his ex-partner, Stefano. It shows the comprehension of readers about the story Riak Kalbu, and the feedback like his experience in reading digital storytelling by @Abiyasha.

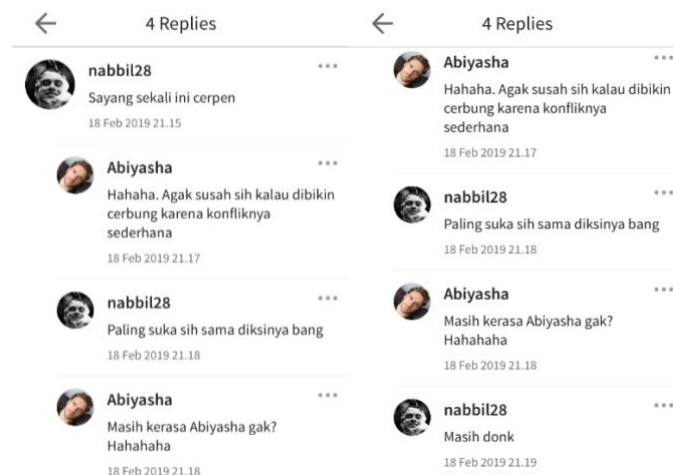


Fig. 8. Conversation on comment column between @nabbil28 and @Abiyasha.

This experience is also told by @nabbil28 (Figure 8) [37] who regrets that the work Riak Kalbu is only in short story. From the question about "Do it still feels like Abiyasha? Ha ha ha ha", and the answer from @nabbil28 portrays that the reader has other experiences with other

stories of @Abiyasha. @nabbil28 also argues that he loves the diction that used by @Abiyasha in this work.

### 3.4 Experiential Stories

This experiential story level tries to discover the writer's experience by using digital storytelling platform Wattpad, moreover in producing story. This analysis uses Dillard's Model [39] that divides message production into three steps, those are Goal, Plan, and Action.

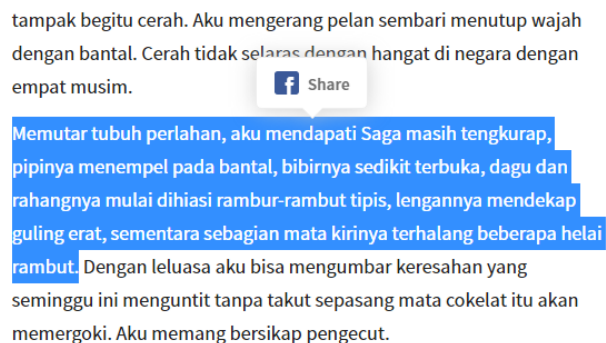
#### 3.4.1 Goal

On the level of Goal, commonly the writer only creates a story with gay themed. The desire to change society's taboo view about gay becomes one of goals from the writer.

“Obviously. It is my reason why I only create story with gay themed because not much writers focus on one genre (lot of reader who haven't known that Queer fiction is a genre) and wish that society's view will change slowly but sure. Thus, the word gay is not in italic style although it is not in Indonesia Dictionary (KBBI). I want to normalise that word although only in a story”.

The writer already has created gay themed since 2011 and just joined Wattpad in 2015, but there is no special intention to join. His participation in Wattpad is pure because his friend's ask to upload story to the platform and also the writer feels curious. The reason of choosing gay themed in Riak Kalbu because since long time ago the writer only focusses on one topic.

Besides that, in interview there are some screenshots from story Riak Kalbu aimed to ask the goals of the scene in the story. Like at the first screenshot about the main character who looks at his boyfriend's sleep face, Saga, on the bed (Figure 9) [37].



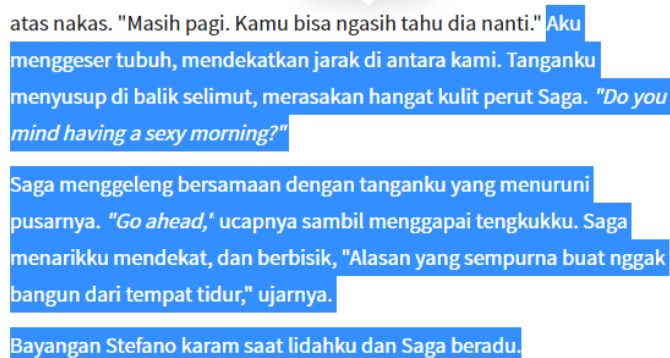
tampak begitu cerah. Aku mengerang pelan sembari menutup wajah dengan bantal. Cerah tidak selaras dengan hangat di negara dengan empat musim.

Memutar tubuh perlahan, aku mendapati Saga masih tengkurap, pipinya menempel pada bantal, bibirnya sedikit terbuka, dagu dan rahangnya mulai dihiasi rambut-rambut tipis, lengannya mendekap guling erat, sementara sebagian mata kirinya terhalang beberapa helai rambut. Dengan leluasa aku bisa mengumbar keresahan yang seminggu ini menguntit tanpa takut sepasang mata cokelat itu akan memergoki. Aku memang bersikap pengecut.

**Fig. 9.** Screenshot of Riak Kalbu part: Turning slowly, I found Saga still on her stomach, her cheeks pressed against the pillow, her lips slightly parted, her chin and jaw began to be adorned with thin hair, her arms clasped tightly, while part of her left eye was blocked by a few strands of hair.

“I write this scene so that the character of I really give attention to the Saga's behaviour when he is sleeping. Also wish that guilty feeling of I will decrease if he gives more attention to Saga”.

Next is the scene in the end of story when the writer wants to end the narrative of Riak Kalbu (Figure 10) [37]. The work in this scene is intimate enough because it is portrayed on the bed.



atas nakas. "Masih pagi. Kamu bisa ngasih tahu dia nanti." Aku  
menggeser tubuh, mendekatkan jarak di antara kami. Tanganku  
menyusup di balik selimut, merasakan hangat kulit perut Saga. "Do you  
mind having a sexy morning?"  
Saga menggeleng bersamaan dengan tanganku yang menuruni  
pusarnya. "Go ahead," ucapnya sambil menggapai tengkukku. Saga  
menarikku mendekat, dan berbisik, "Alasan yang sempurna buat nggak  
bangun dari tempat tidur," ujarnya.  
Bayangan Stefano karam saat lidahku dan Saga beradu.

**Fig. 10.** Screenshot of Riak Kalbu part: I shifted my body, close the distance between us. My hand slipped under the blanket, feeling the warm skin of Saga's stomach. "Do you mind having a sexy morning?" Saga shook her head along with my hand down the navel. "Go ahead", he said, reaching for the nape of my neck. Saga pulled me closer and whispered, "The perfect excuse for not getting out of bed", he said. Stefano's shadow sank when my tongue and Saga collided.

"I feel this is perfect ending. Although I already have sworn will forget Stefano and do this relationship with Saga, there is guilty feeling which is not gone completely. I wish, through sex, his guilty will go away and he can omit Stefano from his thought".

According to the writer's explanation, this ending scene has a detail and complex meaning about character's mind who is gay with all his thought. Besides that, another intention of the writer in producing digital storytelling with taboo themed is so that the readers can get the quality story and written seriously though the research inside. However, in joining this contest the writer does not have special intention, even to win it, because this is the first time he joins.

### 3.4.2 Plan

Related to the previous that there is no special intention of the writer in order to join this contest, so what @Abiyasha does is treats this contest like when he creates other stories, that is always give the best.

"Actually, I don't wish to win because I join some contests and I never won. I treat last contest as usual. Writes as good as possible, wish my readers will love it".

The concrete step that done in this work is follow the guidelines of the contest. The next is the idea of short story that have got will be saved first while finalise the concept. After getting a fixed concept, @Abiyasha starts writing it. The process of creating, based on writer's opinion, usually he will sit one day long. After creating, @Abiyasha will let his work about a week and after that he will revise it. Besides that, the writer also asks his friend's opinion.

“For Riak Kalbu, LGBTQINA ask the participants to choose one quote, then I elaborate the story with it. From it, the process of creating will be as usual. When I get ideas for short story, usually I will let it then will I finalise the concept. When I already have been fixed for it, I will write it. Usually for short story, I will sit for one day long. Then I will let it for a week, before I revise. After that I ask friend’s opinion. It is also for Riak Kalbu”.

### **3.4.3 Action**

On the action step, there are more description about what is done by @Abiyasha in message producing. Like giving new stories as the reward for readers.

“I rarely give reward for readers except in some words. If I have new story, usually I will give it as the appreciation”.

In terms of domination, @Abiyasha says that he is not the type of writer who follows what readers want. All feedback given by the readers are usually applied in subsequent writings.

“I am not a writer who follows what readers want. Critique, comment, and suggestion usually will be applied for the next work. Which one that I shall fix from previous story. The readers never had contribution in determining story, either the beginning, middle, or ending”.

The writer also gives introduction in words, “The story is long enough... it is different in diction side...”, it is delivered cause there are differences that has been done by @Abiyasha in creating Riak Kalbu. Like diction, how to write, and tone of the story which is different than previous stories.

From Goal and Plan of the writer, there are several things that being evaluation, like comment. In the story, the writer gives message ‘I wait for your votes and comments’ which is successful because the readers give their feedback to @Abiyasha story. According to the writer’s opinion, the using of diction which different from previous stories is a successful. Besides that, there is evaluation towards unsuccessful part of production process.

“I think the mood swing of character 'I' to forget Stefano is too fast and the end of the story is not creative and corny. I am not really success to make Riak Kalbu becomes a story without dialogue like what I want. The dialogue at the end of the story feels like a sudden decision. I wish I will be more careful and patient if I want to finish one story and stick to the original idea although it is easy to change it”.

The writing technique is highlighted by @Abiyasha in the evaluation of Riak Kalbu's writing process. @Abiyasha feels that his writing on the shifts of character's mood and the flow of the story are too fast as well as his desire to make a dialogue-less story which not work.

## **4 Conclusion**

LGBT is still taboo in Indonesia with the rampant reporting of raids, reporting, and the dismissal of people with different sexual orientations. However, different cyber culture emerges,

in the form of interactions about LGBT that runs on the digital storytelling platform, Wattpad. Through findings and discussions about digital storytelling with the taboo theme, it can be seen that Wattpad is a new media platform that embraces LGBT-themed stories or stories. In this platform, taboo in the community creates a different interaction because there are no rules that curb writers and readers as consumers of LGBT content.

As a second-generation type of media where LGBT cyber culture runs, the features offered by Wattpad greatly support the interactivity of the users. Wattpad also officially supports taboo content, one of them is in Indonesia through creating official account @lgbtina. Through this account, interactions occur among entities, i.e. writers and readers of taboo content. The culture of support for LGBT on the Wattpad platform displays entity interactions that produce cultural artefacts within it.

In February 2019, this account held Valentine's Day contest with one of the winners is @Abiyasha. This writer wins the race through a gay-themed short story entitled Riak Kalbu. One of the goals of @Abiyasha to write LGBT-themed content is to change people's views. In this taboo content, the reader gives a lot of comments about the contents of the story, the characters in it as well as praise and prayers related to the competition. Not only one-way communication, @Abiyasha replies readers' feedback of the story and there is discussion of Riak Kalbu. In the production of taboo content, @Abiyasha makes a search for short story ideas to translate the quotes specified in the contest. Then the idea is used to finalise the concept of the story and then start the writing process. In the evaluation phase, several things have been achieved and not yet emerged. Among the goals achieved is interactivity through the comment's column, and the use of different diction is considered quite successful by the writer. Meanwhile, the storyline that is too fast made the initial Goal @Abiyasha not reached because the dialogue that occurred becomes impressed suddenly. As well as the development of a character's day atmosphere that is not appropriate so as to give the impression of not creative and cliché in the story Riak Kalbu.

Although LGBT is still a taboo in Indonesia, in reality, digital storytelling content with this taboo theme appears in digital media. Interactivity and features and support available in Wattpad's new media gives users space to produce and interact with taboo content.

## 5 Acknowledgments

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