



## Voices of Digital Natives: Navigating the Digital Divide and Structural Violence in Banyumas Children's Pandemic Narrative

Aldi Aditya<sup>1\*</sup>, Wiekandini Dyah Pandanwangi<sup>2</sup>, Umami Nurjamil Baiti Lapiana<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Indonesian Literature Study Program, Department of Indonesian Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, Indonesia

[aldi.aditya@unsoed.ac.id](mailto:aldi.aditya@unsoed.ac.id), [wiekandini.pandanwangi@unsoed.ac.id](mailto:wiekandini.pandanwangi@unsoed.ac.id), [ummi.nurjamil@unsoed.ac.id](mailto:ummi.nurjamil@unsoed.ac.id)

\*Correspondence author

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on *Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas* an anthology of COVID-19-themed short stories, to explore how children responded to the pandemic amidst a significant regional digital divide. Employing a close reading method, the study examines 20 selected narratives as forms of life writing to understand the intersection of global crisis, youth agency, and technology. The research finds that children, acting as digital natives, integrated digital devices into their daily subjectivity, using them as vital emotional instruments to maintain resilience and generate creative novelty output to combat isolation and boredom. However, the analysis reveals that the pandemic was not a neutral event but one that exacerbated structural violence, exposing a complex continuum of digital inequality. This continuum categorizes youth into the "Haves," who possess the devices and literacy to remain productive; the "Marginalized," who face economic barriers to access; and the "Excluded," who suffer absolute digital silence due to a lack of basic infrastructure like electricity. The study concludes that because digital technology now fundamentally defines 21st-century childhood, inclusive policies such as government-sponsored computer loans and free village internet must persist beyond the pandemic to ensure equitable ICT diffusion and prevent the permanent marginalization of vulnerable youth.

**Keywords:** Banyumas; children literature; COVID-19 pandemic; digital divide; Indonesia

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## Introduction

COVID-19 brought real challenges to children when it broke out in 2020 around the world. They experienced "social distancing," avoiding the crowds and direct contact with others outside their homes. Kindergartens, schools, game centers, and recreation areas are closed. Disruption to social life has made almost all schools change the implementation of learning activities to online. However, it has also elucidated and exacerbated many forms of prevailing digital inequalities (Ryan & Nanda, 2022, p. 114)(Ryan & Nanda, 2022). Digital divide refers to the gap between those with access to information and communication technology (ICT) and those without (Kouzmin, 2000)(Kouzmin, 2000). In online learning in Southeast Asia and Indonesia, the pandemic accelerated digitalization in many ways but was not accompanied by digital adoption or digital diffusion (Gong et al., 2022); (Gemiharto et al., 2022). Digital adoption, which is defined as the primary use of digital technology to replace physical routines (Lee & Han, 2021), and digital diffusion, which examines how, why, and at what rate new ideas, products, and services spread through social systems over time, were not universally embraced. As an illustration, one of the problems in digital diffusion during a pandemic is the uneven internet network infrastructure from one region to another. In Indonesia, the shift in learning activities from school to home has made it difficult for many households in villages because they do not have internet access, so some residents have taken the initiative to open their internet access during school hours (Perkasa, 2022). Therefore, some children learn from home, and others learn from such "emergency public internet centers." During the COVID-19 pandemic, each child's experience of school and social life is different because not all children have the same access to ICT, which is very close to their lives in the midst of a pandemic.

In Indonesia, the digital divide problem during the COVID-19 Pandemic is represented in short stories written by children. In March 2021, children in Banyumas, Indonesia, expressed their feelings and experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic by participating in a short story writing competition themed "Me and the Pandemic" held by Banyumas Children's Forum (Forum Anak Banyumas, from here abbreviated as FAB). In our interview with Muhammad Aditya Ibnu, Chairman of FAB, the activity was carried out to make the most of free time, tell stories, create experiences, and have fun. About 300 incoming manuscripts were then selected by three judges so that the remaining 20 short stories were selected, which were later published as an anthology. As a result, an anthology entitled *Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas* "Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas" (Santoso et al., 2021) was launched to coincide with the commemoration of National Children's Day on July 23 at the Banyumas regional government office (Sutrisno; Wicaksono, Ronny; Futaki, 2021).

This initiative is essential because literature, encompassing poetry and prose, serves as a vital response to outbreaks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, offering emotional support (Leathers, 2020); (Lahman et al., 2021); (Xiang & Yi, 2020). In times of crisis, literary works help individuals comprehend and navigate challenges, leveraging emotions, reasoning, perspectives, and imagination to share experiences. However, studies reveal a negative impact on children's writing skills during the pandemic, affecting quality, fluency, interest, and attitude (Clark et al., 2023). Remote instruction exacerbates these challenges, yet creative writing programs can

enhance children's enjoyment and frequency of writing in leisure (Clark et al., 2023). Bibliotherapy, including therapeutic reading, emerges as a valuable tool for children to navigate emotions, providing an expressive outlet and aiding identification with characters in stories (Lowe, 2009); (Lucas et al., 2013). In summary, literature and writing have served as essential tools for individuals to understand and cope with crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic has had a negative impact on children's writing engagement, providing opportunities for creative writing and therapeutic reading can positively influence their enjoyment and frequency of writing during such challenging times.

In addition to Banyumas, in other regions in Indonesia, various elements of society write with the theme of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as *To Kill the Invisible Killer* (Gunawan & Malay, 2020), *Kumpulan Puisi Komunikasi Melawan Pandemi 'Collection of Poems, Communication Against the Pandemic'* (Bakri et al., 2020), *Ayo Lawan Covid! Kumpulan Puisi Anak-Anak Tanah Marapu di Masa Pandemi COVID-19 'Let's Fight Covid! A Collection of Poems by the Children of The Land of Marapu during the COVID-19 Pandemic'* (Timoria, 2020). Analyzing social problems such as the digital divide due to the pandemic is possible for these works, especially since these works are a good source for qualitative research on the digital divide, which is encouraged to "bring forward the precise mechanism explaining the appropriation and division of the technology in everyday life" (Dijk, 2006).

This paper will focus on a collection of short stories written by Banyumas children to find out how they are responding to the pandemic and facing the challenges that arise. It is critical because it provides valuable documentation of local memories in Banyumas, a region that faced a disproportionately high COVID-19 threat and significant digital inequality. Additionally, it amplifies children's voices to reveal how the pandemic exacerbated the digital divide and structural violence, offering essential insights for creating more inclusive social and educational policies. These short stories are important to discuss the pandemic in Banyumas, Central Java Province, Indonesia, given that the Island of Java was the epicenter of COVID-19 in Indonesia, with Jakarta and West Java Province both having the highest number of COVID-19 cases in Indonesia. Within Central Java itself, Banyumas Regency was one of the regencies with the highest number of active COVID-19 sufferers (Budiarto, 2022); (Zain & Arief, 2022). This status illustrates the threat level of COVID-19 in Banyumas, which was higher than in other regions with demographic differences. Then, Central Java province was also one of the provinces with a high level of digital divide (Ariyanti, 2013); (Mulyaningsih et al., 2020). Given the latest news, directives, and government policies regarding the pandemic were routinely conveyed through social media such as Instagram, it is worth checking the extent of the effectiveness of delivering these messages in the midst of a high digital divide.

Second, literary works are important and valuable as documentation that holds memories and experiences of dealing with the pandemic. Our experience when the flu epidemic coincided with the World War in the early 19th century showed that the art and literary world tends to remain silent and mute, and silent to talk about the devastating effects of the pandemic (Outka, 2019). In the annals of history, the loss of life of millions of people due to the flu is unequal to the loss of life of many people due to war. Outka underlines this with the sentence, "The

pandemic killed more people, but it's the war we remember" (p. 254). We prefer to talk about war rather than a pandemic because the violence there appears clear, direct, and instantaneous, while violence in a pandemic is hidden, indirect, and delayed. In a pandemic, the main factors are microscopic viruses, germs, and bacteria, so the enemies that must be fought are invisible to the naked eye. They are nonhuman, foreign, and difficult to characterize. It is for this intangible and foreign nature that people associate it with aliens or "others." Therefore, the association of the flu outbreak with specific loci, such as the "Spanish Flu" or the "Wuhan Flu," contains a sense of foreign taint. That way, it can be understood how in the early turn of the XX century, the pandemic was relatively absent in Indonesian literature, considering that Indonesia was affected by the 1850-1914 thiamine deficiency (or beriberi) outbreak (Heidhues, 2011), the 1911—1916 bubonic plague (Luwis, 2020), and the 1918—1919 flu outbreak (Chandra, 2013); (Ravando, 2022). It is easier to find war scenes in canonical works, such as when Samsu killed Datuk Meringgih in the middle of a battle in Marah Rusli's *Sitti Nurbaya* or when Hasan took refuge in a pit from the threat of airstrikes in Achdiat K. Mihadja's *Atheist*.

The pandemic will not be far from the alienation that goes hand in hand with discrimination, stigma, and inequality (Cahill et al., 2020); (Addo, 2020); (Ryan & Nanda, 2022). Pandemics may be similar to pollution in that they both contain structural violence, which according to Galtung, (2015), is not violence that harms or kills directly, but is the maintenance of the economic and social structure of society that preserves the gap between the poor and the rich, the inferior and superior, and harms those who cannot climb the ladder of social mobility. Some studies (Ryan & Nanda, 2022); (Mungo, 2020) argue that the concept of structural violence is vital for analyzing the social implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the emergence of the aforementioned plague-themed literary works during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic is very important to discuss in order to understand how global crises intersect with local digital divides and structural violence, offering a specific look at youth agency and emotional resilience.

## Methods

The method employed in reading these children's short stories is close reading, to read them as children's experiences. The goal is to understand their responses to the pandemic and how they navigate challenges in the digital divide. Even though all the short stories by children here contain elements of fiction and autobiography, every short story is a significant piece of life writing that represents the voices of the children. The perspective is based on two considerations: first, within the context of the fiction/fact dichotomy in Indonesian literature, fiction is an inevitability, and social life in Indonesia is rich with reality so seemingly fictional that Indonesian society is likened to a sea of fiction, where facts and fiction are thoroughly intermixed (Wahyudi, 2004). Second, language is a social construct; borrowing Haraway's (2000) words in discussing women's experiences, "Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction." Women's experiences become a crucial analogy when Rudd (2005) discusses the "voices of children" in the discourse of children's literature, through which children negotiate their social and embodied positioning when it is the adults who hold authority over what qualifies or doesn't qualify as children's

literature. To understand the significance of children's voices, first and foremost, we ascertain the position of children in writing this short story anthology, who the agents involved in its production are, and the extent of adult involvement in it. The research examines the specific language in these stories to see how children describe technology and the internet. By looking closely at their writing, I aim to show how gadgets actually shaped their daily routines, feelings, and thoughts while they were stuck at home.

## Results

### ***Banyumas Children's Experience in the COVID-19 Pandemic***

These short stories were written by children. Before framing it with the concept of "children's literature," it should be seen how much adults are involved in the writing of this collection of short stories. The initiator of the preparation of this children's short story anthology is the Banyumas Children's Forum (FAB), a district-level branch of the National Children's Forum (Forum Anak Nasional), a children's organization fostered by the Government of the Republic of Indonesia through the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection. It aims to emphasize the importance of children's participation in development and the need of a broad space for children to voice their aspirations (*Jelang HAN 2025, Kemen PPPA Dorong Partisipasi Anak Dalam Pembangunan Berkelanjutan*, 2025). In Banyumas, the Children's Forum referred to the Office of Population Control, Family Planning, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection (Dinas Pengendalian Penduduk, Keluarga Berencana, Pemberdayaan Perempuan, dan Perlindungan Anak, abbreviated as DPPKBP3A). FAB has driving cadres in 27 sub-districts throughout Banyumas, whose membership is at least determined by the maximum age limit of 18 years.

The technical guide provides information and regulations for contestants. The main requirement is that participants must be residents of Banyumas Regency who are under 18 years old. This age limit corresponds to the legal definition in Indonesia, marking the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood as children are defined as "someone who is under 18 (eighteen) years old, including children still in the womb" (Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 35 of 2014 concerning Amendments to Law No. 23 of 2002 concerning Child Protection). Then, another article in the technical guide stipulates that the theme of this writing competition is "Me during the Pandemic." Participants could write from March 17, 2021, until the submission deadline on April 17, 2021. The works must be created by the participants themselves, handwritten on lined folio paper, consisting of 2 to 4 pages. In an interview with us, Muhammad Aditya Ibnu (Ibnu), Chairman of the FAB and coordinator of the competition, explained that manuscripts must be handwritten because FAB wanted the works of children from Banyumas to be preserved in a time capsule, but this plan was not implemented due to budget constraints. Subsequently, FAB members in the sub-districts were mobilized to promote the competition to junior and high schools in their respective areas. After collecting about 300 manuscripts, three adult judges selected the best 20 during the judging period from April 18 to April 30, 2021. The selected manuscripts were then submitted to SIP Publishing, a local publisher in Banyumas, during the recording period from May 1 to July 1, 2021. The publishing staff retyped the

handwritten works. Then, the award ceremony for the competition was held on National Children's Day, on July 23, 2021, at the Banyumas Regent's Office, attended directly by Regent Achmad Husein.

Ibnu acknowledged numerous shortcomings in book publication due to time constraints and the limited knowledge of the committee, all of whom are high school students. The committee members are generally involved in local organizations at their respective schools, causing their busy schedules to hinder them from meeting the predetermined deadlines in scheduling. Additionally, financial issues posed a hindrance to this book competition due to the pandemic period in Indonesia, which was susceptible to budget refocusing and reallocation aimed at pandemic prevention and control efforts (Mas'udi, W. & Winanti, 2020); (Ginting et al., 2020). As a result, there were deficiencies here and there; for instance, apart from the cancellation of the plan to turn the children's manuscripts into a time capsule, the identity page of the book needs an editor's name. However, concerning the extent of children's voices in this anthology, Ibnu confirmed that the committee "could not be sure whether the child was assisted by an adult when drafting the manuscript, but ensured that the involvement of adults since the manuscript was received by the committee was only in the selection process and the technicalities of publishing."

The absence of an editing stage in the anthology publication made the experience of Banyumas children appear as it is. At that point, children are in complete control of storytelling and expressing their experiences through their language. In children's literature, language allows individuals to compare experiences with each other, which becomes a fundamental aim of children's literature. Representations of experiences such as growing up, becoming more self-aware, falling in love, facing conflict, or, in this case, struggling through the COVID-19 pandemic emerge in language and guarantee the experience can be shared with fellow human beings. Language can present experiences felt by people living in other places and at different times, so that the reader can define their subjectivity in accepting potentialities and differences.

In the context of children's literature, this anthology of children's short stories from Banyumas is significant because it gives children an important role in expressing their experiences. Adult involvement remains present in curation and production, but such inevitability is challenging to eliminate in children's literature. Children's literature is a messy and complex realm (Rudd, 2005), as both adults and children engage in a dialogical relationship with narratives through writing and reading, or, in the case of the Banyumas anthology, curation and judging. The success of these texts as "children's literature" depends on how effectively they navigate the hybrid or borderland between different discourses and perspectives. Childhood persists as adults continuously rework their history. The imagined concerns of childhood influence later discourses and contribute to the emotional landscape of adults about childhood. Adults, too, are not secure in their status, with some children's authors expressing a desire to expose the complexities of adult identity in relation to the hybrid nature of the discourse.

By engaging in life writing, young individuals are empowered to become active participants in responding to societal issues while shaping their own identities. Through life writing, these young writers challenge and shape community perspectives, positioning themselves as invested

and engaged members of society (Douglas & Poletti, 2016). This mode of expression is particularly crucial during times of crisis, as it provides an avenue for children to articulate their perspectives and contribute to broader societal discussions. Their narratives reflect the experiences of a generation often defined as "digital natives"—individuals aged 13 to 17 for whom digital technology is integral to their daily subjectivity. This theoretical framework helps explain why digital devices appear as constant companions in their stories. Their natural fluency in ICT allowed them to combat pandemic-induced boredom through "novelty outputs," which provided them with a sense of purpose and productivity amidst social distancing.

Based on the anthology *Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas*, what do children feel in the midst of a pandemic? The answers are complex and can even contradict each other. There is sadness and joy, despair and hope, frustration and resilience, and anxiety and calmness. In this anthology, several works are thick with elements of fiction, and some works are autobiographical, with the author very closely represented by the character. In this discussion, the main character in the short story is distinguished from the author.

The anthology's first story, "In the Twist of a Blanket," by 14-year-old Qanita, details her daily pandemic routine, expressing weariness with online schooling, assignments, videos, and internet struggles. Despite not hating the system, she longs for the normalcy of traditional schools, emphasized later by the question, "When will everything return to the way it was before? All its activities were already monotonous and uninteresting" (*Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas*, p. 14). Meanwhile, a different experience is presented by Ziyadatul in the story "The Ghost Is Named Rapid and Swab". Her short story recounts the experience of a santri (Islamic boarding school student) from March 2020 to January 2021. Due to pandemic conditions, the main character shifted between the pesantren and home for almost a year. The travel, involving rapid tests causing anxiety, led to overwhelming panic with reactive results, transforming into immense joy upon testing negative for COVID-19. Traveling, including quarantine, also caused the main character to miss a poignant moment—unable to visit her deceased grandmother during the pandemic. Her story closes with a testimonial of COVID-19.

*"The COVID-19 period has given me many life experiences I will never forget. There is joy, sadness, fear, and anxiety." (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, p. 14)*

The experiences of Qanita and Ziyadatul offer a profound theoretical window into how children's daily subjectivities were reshaped by the pandemic's digital and structural demands. Qanita's narrative in "In the Twist of a Blanket" exemplifies the digital native identity, where technology is so seamlessly integrated into her life that her day begins and ends with her mobile phone, making her weariness a reaction to the monotony of digital adoption—the mere replacement of physical routines with mandatory screen-based labor. While Qanita is fluent in using technology, her weariness highlights a specific phenomenon where digital tools are used to replace physical routines. Her fatigue with online schooling and constant video assignments suggests that for a digital native, the frustration lies not in the technology itself, but in the monotony created when digital platforms merely mimic traditional school labor rather than providing creative or social fulfillment. Her reliance on the internet for school and communication underscores that digital technology is now a crucial aspect in defining childhood

in the 21st century. For Qanita, internet struggles are not just technical glitches but significant disruptions to her ability to participate in society and maintain her daily identity. Ultimately, Qanita's story moves beyond a simple description of online school. It shows how a digital native navigates a world where their primary medium of existence—the digital realm—becomes a site of both necessity and exhaustion during a global crisis.

Meanwhile, Ziyadatul's experience in "The Ghost Is Named Rapid and Swab" illustrates the concept of hidden and indirect violence that characterizes a pandemic. Unlike the clear and direct violence usually found in war stories, the violence Ziyadatul faces is microscopic and systemic, manifesting as the intense anxiety of medical testing and the structural barriers of quarantine that prevented her from grieving with her family. Her story also highlights the role of the mobile phone as a vital emotional instrument. When physical presence was impossible, the digital device became the only means to maintain human connection and articulate the profound "joy, sadness, fear, and anxiety" of a crisis that left her socially and physically isolated.

Other stories describe more positive feelings during the pandemic, one of which is the work of Nabila Kamalia, entitled "Pandemic and a Million Stories". The main character is reunited with her parents, who were sent home from Korea due to the pandemic. This simple short story only tells her family's activities at home and the circumstances she is grateful for at the end of the story.

*"At first, I thought this pandemic only brought negativity because it could change the economy and decrease education in Indonesia. This pandemic always serves as a barrier to meeting friends, even family. Yes, it's true. But, upon reflection, it's also good. If there had not been a pandemic, the people of the earth would have been busy working and forgetting about their families." (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, pp. 95-96)*

Habibah Nur's "Troublesome or Fun?" highlights the main character's joy in walking, chatting, and snacking with friends in public places during the pandemic while still reminding each other to adhere to health protocols. Azizaturrahmah Adrian's "Different Victories" expresses gratitude for celebrating Eid al-Fitr at the pesantren, despite being unable to go home. These three stories collectively emphasize finding joy amidst pandemic difficulties, illustrating that it brings families closer and doesn't hinder socializing.

A different tone, anger, is obtained from Sefiana Rahma's "Hope of White-Grey." In this short story, the main character is furious about the plague. The story begins with the main character looking at the 2020 calendar with a "bitter chuckle, given the sheer number of people who indulged that year." She was supposed to start enjoying her first year of high school, which would be fun, but instead, she found "boring days" because of the pandemic. In this short story, the mention of plague or wabah is followed by phrases that show annoyance of "I," such as wabah sialan (damn plague), wabah menyebalkan (annoying plague), and wabah tidak tahu diri (despicable plague).

*"I remember my sibling used to say the most beautiful times were during high school. Huh, but what is this? Even I have to attend school from home, while my schoolmates say our school is beautiful and spacious, fully equipped, with good*

*teachers and fun friends. It would have been so enjoyable to go to school like regular students before this damn plague arrived. Ah, the annoying plague, I mean.” (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, p. 113)*

*“Many beautiful things have been missed out on just because this uninvited and despicable plague has overstayed, never returning to its origin.” (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, pp. 114-115)*

Unlike "Different Victories", this short story actually considers that Eid al-Fitr is not pleasant because of the reduced enthusiasm for Eid holiday celebrations. There is no traditional Eid holiday family gathering. Relatives and friends are actually challenging to find because of the prohibition of mudik (holiday travel to the place of origin). The main character lamented not being able to meet her good friend because her friend “did not want to defy the government's order, even though there were people who were desperate to mudik and did not comply with the prohibition”. However, the final part of this short story still tries to see the positive side of the pandemic, which is bringing families closer together and having more focus on hobbies, before condemning the phenomenon of online learning.

*“But not everything that happened during the pandemic was sad. There are many good things, one of them being closer to family and having more time to delve into hobbies and talents. It all depends on how you enjoy it... Learning at home like this does have its advantages. No need to get tired and bothered going to school. In fact, lying down and holding a cell phone, opening and reading materials can already be considered as studying. Quite ridiculous.” (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, pp. 117-118)*

### **Boredom, Perception of Time, and Digital Gadgets**

The diverse experiences of Banyumas children during the pandemic are evident in the described short stories, reflecting various emotions and perspectives on social distancing's positive aspects amid difficulties. A common thread in almost all anthology stories is the frequent mention of mobile phones, the internet, gadgets, and social media terms. In this anthology, "mobile phone" (in the form of the known Indonesian word to express it, such as ponsel, hp, or handphone) is mentioned 42 times, "online" 24 times, "gadget" 7 times, "internet" 7 times, "YouTube" 7 times, and "social media" 3 times. Notably, "Instagram" isn't explicitly mentioned, but 12 authors list their usernames in their biodata, emphasizing the anthology's focus on gadgets, such as computers and mobile phones, and social media, shaping the experiences and emotions of the child characters. The only exception is Trio Musthamid's "Behind the Pandemic," which diverges from this theme and will be discussed later.

The frequent occurrence of technological terms in the anthology stems from several key factors, most notably the integral subjectivity of these 13-to-17-year-old authors who, as digital natives, have never experienced an era without the internet. For this generation, digital technology is not merely an external tool but a foundational part of their daily lives and identities, making terms like "online" and "gadget" natural components of their vocabulary. Furthermore, mobile phones function as vital "emotional instruments" through which children

articulate complex feelings of joy, sadness, and anxiety, serving as the primary medium for maintaining connections and expressing their emotional responses to the crisis. The fact that "mobile phone" (in its various forms) appears 42 times—nearly twice as often as the word "online"—suggests that the physical device is more central to the children's experience than the abstract concept of the internet. These data point to the mobile phone acting as a constant, tangible companion that accompanies them from the moment they wake up until they sleep. The high frequency of "online" (24 times) further underscores that their social and educational lives were almost entirely mediated through digital platforms during the pandemic.

In these short stories, mobile phone-like gadgets appear almost in every moment of children's lives. In fact, the book's first short story, "In the Twist of a Blanket," begins with the main character awakened by her mobile phone alarm (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, p. 1). Even at times of sleep, the mobile phone always accompanies the children in this short story. For example, in Maximilian Masehi's "Small Trouble," when the main character sleeps with "the mobile phone next to his head" (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, p. 68). These children slept close to their mobile phones, and when they woke up, they first saw their mobile phones. The presence of a mobile phone at any time in the life of children is stated precisely in "Mrs. Procrastination".

*"My daily life at home is staring at the phone screen. When studying, playing, eating, or even before going to bed, I must have grasped that hand-held thing."*  
(Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, p. 35)

Boredom is a prevalent theme in every story, with the word "bored" appearing 18 times in the anthology. Often linked to mobile phones or digital learning, three stories—Sefiana's "Asa White Grey," Vania Eka's "What You Want to Hear," and Kanna Dinis' "The Story at the Beginning of My White-Blue Time"—depict boredom arising from online learning due to social distancing. Conversely, children also combat boredom by using mobile phones, as seen in "What I Want to Hear," "Troublesome or Fun," and "Posit-type Positive," where the main characters acknowledge playing mobile phones as an alternative to stave off boredom. This boredom is related to the perception of time during the pandemic. In the short story, there are also various expressions that time flies so fast, such as in Annisa Nur's "Productive in the Pandemic Period," which tells her daily routine and testifies, "It doesn't feel like it's been a year since we have been undergoing distance learning". Quite a few statements emerged that the pandemic was thought to be fleeting and lasted longer than expected. The short stories "Me and My Hopes in the Time of a Pandemic" by Arif Maolana and "Pandemic and a Million Stories" contain the words "can't believe this situation will last long" and "what was said only two weeks turned out to be up to a year". The quote in the short story "What You Want To Hear" by Vania Eka represents the boredom expressed through the perception of time.

*"By the way, it's been more than a year since the pandemic hit Indonesia, right? It's been over a year that we've been imprisoned in our own homes. It's been over a year that we've been learning through online systems. Can I ask if you are bored with this situation? Do you want to go back to the time before Corona came? But we can't go back, my friends. Whether we like it or not, whether we can or not, we have to keep following the flow of God's story, right? Yes, still, if I find those two questions,*

*I will definitely answer with, 'I'm really bored. I want to go back to the time before Corona came! I miss school, friends, and companions!'" (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, pp. 102-103)*

Guan et al. (2020) have discussed the perception of time during a pandemic. They say time can feel faster or slower depending on what new things a person can do during a pandemic, and "looking for novelty" is vital in alleviating boredom. In Guan et al's (2020) empirical research, "novelty output," or an individual's creative efforts to generate new ideas or products, is a way to cope with the pandemic. Individuals may feel meaningful in the process of creating novelty output. This novelty output can be found in several short stories of Banyumas children who invite them to stay productive during the pandemic. The pandemic necessitated a shift toward mandatory digital adoption, where digital technology replaced physical routines, making these terms essential for describing the new, often monotonous reality of online schooling and daily labor during social isolation. The children's fluency with digital terms like "YouTube" and "gadgets" exemplifies the digital native experience, where a generation that has grown up seamlessly with the internet employs its inherent ICT literacy to generate creative novelty output—such as blogging, creating Fan Music Videos, or writing novels—as a vital means of overcoming pandemic-induced boredom. For these youth, digital technology has become a fundamental pillar defining childhood in the 21st century.

In "Productive in the Pandemic Period," Annisa Nur details her daily routine, embracing new hobbies like cooking and learning English, and actively participating in sports, student council, and the children's forum until "it doesn't feel like a year has passed" (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, p. 122). Another story, "Mrs. Procrastination," explores the challenges of balancing creative pursuits, such as a movie review blog and a Fan Music Video, with school responsibilities, creating a pile-up of neglected work. "Posit-type Positive" by Ngindana Aghits narrates how the main character becomes a coordinator for COVID-19 relief donations, emphasizing the role of young people in time of crisis: "persistent and responsible young people, the future diamonds of the country, must be ready to start... to move with spirit, determination, and heart" (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, p. 54). Nafhisa Diva's "Thousands of Words of My Writing" portrays a girl who finds novelty in writing novels during the pandemic, publishing them on an online literacy app and delighting in reader comments and reviews. These stories showcase diverse approaches to seeking novelty and staying engaged during challenging times and demonstrate that computers and mobile phones are crucial in finding such novelty output.

However, what happens when these children lose their mobile phones? Their panic and fear are clearly told. Salsabila Putri's "Tragedy in the Pandemic" tells the story of the theft experienced by the main character and her family. Two motorcycles and three mobile phones of the house's occupants in the incident were stolen, including the main character's. She felt shocked for a few days and, as a result, was unable to attend online school. The importance of mobile phones is implicitly found at the story's beginning when the main character rejoices after her father, who has been abroad for 4 months and cannot return to Indonesia due to the pandemic, calls her. So, when her mobile phone is stolen, she will not be able to contact her father again in the meantime. In another story, a lost phone can mean anger from the father. In

"What You Want to Hear", the main character's phone fell and got lost. While searching for it, she imagined the problems entailed by not finding her mobile phone: difficulties in attending online school lessons and potential reprimands from her father.

*"I definitely have to bring that mobile phone home. It's not for nothing; the phone already contains various assignments I've done during online learning. The worst thing that could happen if I go home without bringing that phone is that I'll face my father's anger for seven days and seven nights." (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, pp. 99-100)*

*"However, such an event actually happened in another short story, "Hill of Aspiration," when the main character's mobile phone fell at the school, and the screen cracked. Ratna felt uneasy, doubtful, and afraid, and her father's anger really happened when he heard the incident and said, "The cost of repairing such a mobile phone is expensive. My income is only enough for daily meals." (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, pp. 129-131).*

The short stories analyzed in this part highlight the significant role that mobile phones play in children's daily lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although these devices are frequently used for online schooling, they can also be a valuable tool for discovering new sources of entertainment and overcoming pandemic-related monotony. Children express joy in their ability to connect with friends and family via phone or video calls. On the other hand, they also rely on their mobile phones to communicate sadness, as seen when a santri in one of the short stories calls his father to convey his inability to return home for Eid. Mobile phones serve as a means for children to maintain contact with loved ones and the outside world, making them a crucial instrument in their emotional response to the pandemic. Children feel helpless when their phones are lost or damaged, and their connection to others and the world is temporarily severed. The children's reliance on these devices to communicate a full spectrum of emotions demonstrates that the digital realm became the primary venue for emotional resilience during a period of mandatory social distancing. When these connections are severed by theft or damage, the resulting helplessness is not simply an inconvenience; it represents a social and emotional amputation that isolates them from their support systems. Within the context of the digital divide, this loss is particularly catastrophic for those with limited digital capital, as the inability to repair or replace a device can lead to absolute exclusion from both education and family life. Ultimately, this data confirms that digital technology is now a crucial aspect of defining childhood in the 21st century, as a child's emotional well-being is increasingly tied to their access to and mastery of the digital world.

### ***Representation of Poverty and the Digital Divide***

The familiarity of these children with mobile phones and information and communication technology (ICT) raises questions about the significant role of mobile phones in their daily pandemic experiences. Exploring the concept of digital natives (Prensky, 2021), who grew up surrounded by digital technology, aligns with the children's fluency in ICT portrayed in the short stories. These 13 to 17-year-olds live seamlessly with the internet and mobile phones from morning till night, having never experienced an era without these technologies. For them, digital

technology is an integral aspect of life, and the disappearance of a mobile phone, as depicted in some stories, is unimaginable, causing fear about potential consequences.

The "digital native" concept, while briefly explaining the children's connection to digital technology, raises significant issues. Firstly, it often portrays the generation as homogeneous, overlooking the diversity in their pandemic experiences (Thompson, 2015). Secondly, it creates binary distinctions rather than acknowledging a continuum (Brown et al., 2016). Thirdly, the "digital native" and "digital immigrant" divide extends beyond age to include limited access influenced by class, race, and gender (Ebo, 1998). The digital divide, marked by inequality in internet access, is a crucial issue warranting further qualitative research (Dijk, 2006). In the frame of the digital divide or access inequality models, Warschauer, (2003) categorizes ICT access into devices, conduits, and literacy. Devices refer to physical ownership, conduits to supporting infrastructure like electricity and the internet, and literacy to an individual's mastery of ICT processes where culturally significant information is encoded.

By looking at the digital access inequality, we can analyze one short story in an anthology themed on the COVID-19 pandemic that does not mention mobile phones or digital technology. We have discussed how the anthology mentioned several words related to ICT. While the data shows a high frequency of digital terms across the anthology, the digital divide theory is actually most visible in the absence of these words in a certain story: "Behind the Pandemic". It does not mention mobile phones or the internet at all because the characters are struggling with structural violence and absolute poverty. Therefore, the repetition of these words serves as a marker of digital capital. It highlights the gap between the "haves," who are bored with their gadgets, and the "have-nots," for whom the lack of these terms in their life stories signifies a profound exclusion from modern social and educational opportunities.

"Behind the Pandemic" tells the story of a poor family, a couple, Karno and Siti, and their daughter, Ayu. In the evening during the pandemic, Karno, who is struggling with his job, left in the morning. In a bamboo-woven walled hut, Ayu whined hungrily at her mother, who could only promise that "Dad will be home soon and bring us delicious rice and mutton" (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, p. 150). Then, the story turns to the rice thief who was beaten to death by villagers in the yard of Siti and Ayu's hut. When Siti and Ayu came out due to the commotion, it turned out that the rice thief who died in the mob's judgment was Karno. Siti cried over her husband, while Ayu also cried, calling out to her father. The story closes tragically.

Ayu became a reserved girl with empty eyes and spent more time with her mother, who could only lie in bed... None of the villagers cared about their fate until, finally, Siti passed away.

*"O, God, what is actually happening to my country?" (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, pp. 153-154)*

The story of the Karno family tragedy is an extreme point in this anthology. This story stands in stark contrast to the generally optimistic tone of the other narratives, which encourage resilience in the face of pandemic-related challenges. For the Karno family, the primary concern is not whether they can attend online school but whether they will have enough food to eat. Their experience is characterized not by the digital woes that plague their more technologically-

equipped peers, such as boredom, reduced productivity, or stunted social lives, but by the specter of hunger. The absence of digital technology in the Karno family's story clearly indicates poverty. In addition to lacking access to digital devices, the Karno family also needs more basic infrastructure, such as electrical conduits. Indeed, the description of their dwelling reveals that it consists of a mere two rooms illuminated by traditional oil lamps (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, p. 148). Therefore, it is difficult to imagine they have Internet access, an essential information and communication technology conduit. The total lack of technological mentions in stories like "Behind the Pandemic" represents an extreme end of the digital divide, where absolute deprivation prevents any digital participation. This form of inequality is defined by a lack of both physical devices and the essential infrastructure, or conduits like electricity, that make connectivity possible. For these children, the absence of digital terms highlights a state of structural violence, where the immediate pressure of hunger and survival replaces the "digital woes" of their peers, effectively severing their connection to 21st-century childhood norms.

Other short stories also address the issue of ICT access, which overlaps with socio-economic problems to varying degrees. In "Me and My Hope in a Pandemic" by Arif Maolana, there is a description like this.

*"Once I took part in online learning. In my opinion, it's the most troublesome thing because my father and mother have to work hard for family life. They have to set aside money so they can buy internet data packages for online activities. My father and mother were just laborers in the area around my house. Their income is only sufficient to meet their basic daily needs." (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, p. 73)*

These child authors are aware of the social problems that arise in the midst of a pandemic. In particular, the short stories "Posit-type Positive" and "The Story at the Beginning of My White-Blue Period" mention social problems during the pandemic, such as false data, corruption, poverty, and the high cost of vaccines and health tests. Their stories shed light on the harsh realities during the pandemic.

*"Yes, what else can we do? There's no low-end or second-tier Android because Dad has been officially laid off, a consequence of the pandemic. So, of course, "our unfortunate fate" became the title of this family." (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, p. 42)*

*"Not to mention the recent news and reports. The pandemic has led to the emergence of fake data, corruption, poverty, and even vaccines and health tests becoming expensive. For the public, all of this has resulted in a declining economy, with many facing bankruptcy. I recall the case of masks at the beginning of the pandemic, which were very scarce and costly." (Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas, p. 142)*

Their stories also show that the pandemic has further exacerbated the already existing digital divide, leading to a widening gap between those with access to technology and those without access. Although the two stories above highlight the harsh reality of the pandemic, the short story "Mrs. Procrastinate" takes a different approach by addressing the issue of luxury in

access. It narrates the tale of a child experiencing boredom during the pandemic, filling time with activities like creating blogs, videos, or Netflix marathons to the point of forgetting schoolwork. This story showcases visible access to devices and channels and presents a literacy model of access as the main character effortlessly learns to create blogs and videos. ICT literacy comes naturally to them. On the other side, the most important thing for them is physical access to digital technology. In "Hill of Aspiration," Ratna obtains a tablet from the government that is lent to students who do not have a device in exchange for her broken mobile phone. Similarly, in "Me and My Hope during the Pandemic," two older siblings who do not have internet access because their parents have just been laid off can take part in online school from the village hall. The school teachers are also described as having concern and empathy for their difficulties.

Digital inequality is further complicated by varying levels of ICT literacy and capability, meaning that even children with devices may face a divide in how they engage with technology. For some, a natural literacy allows for novelty output, while others find digital systems "troublesome" or limited to monotonous school tasks. Some children, such as the protagonist in "Mrs. Procrastinate," demonstrate high capability by effortlessly creating blogs and videos, which the sources call novelty output. This indicates a high level of digital capital. In contrast, other stories depict children who have devices but struggle with the troublesome nature of online systems or internet struggles, representing a gap in the quality of engagement. This shows that even with access to a device, inequality persists if a child lacks the literacy to use technology for more than just monotonous school labor.

The text also suggests that inequality exists on a continuum, where a child's social and economic background dictates their ability to use technology as an emotional instrument for resilience rather than a mere tool for mandatory routines. Rather than a simple binary between "haves" and "have-nots," from the text we can perceive digital inequality as a continuum influenced by multiple factors and categorize the children based on the digital access: (1) The "Haves" which are children who possess devices, high-speed internet, and the literacy to remain productive and creative during isolation; (2) The "Marginalized" which are children who have physical access but face economic barriers, such as the high cost of internet data or broken devices that their families cannot afford to fix; (3) The "Excluded" which are children like Ayu in "Behind the Pandemic," whose lack of social status results in a total absence of digital engagement, showing that social class is often the root that determines a child's initial physical and conduit access.

In summary, the *absence* of technology in certain stories highlights the hidden violence of a pandemic that preserves gaps between social classes. However, it also acknowledges that digital inequality is a complex realm where a child's capability to appropriate technology for their own emotional and creative resilience is just as critical as owning a device. These stories underscore the urgent need for equitable access to technology and resources, particularly during times of crisis. The digital divide in Indonesia is a pressing issue that needs to be addressed to ensure that all children have equal access to education and other opportunities.

## Conclusion

Three things can be concluded at the end of this paper. First, writing has a pivotal role in amplifying the voices and perspectives of children, particularly in matters pertaining to sociocultural issues that directly impact them, in this case, during the COVID-19 Pandemic. By providing the means for children to express themselves through writing on traditional or digital platforms, we gain valuable insights into their experiences, concerns, and aspirations. This, in turn, enriches our understanding and facilitates more inclusive approaches to addressing the challenges they face. Although the COVID-19 pandemic's acute phase has concluded, inclusive approaches remain essential because the digital divide continues to be a pressing issue that fundamentally defines childhood in the 21st century. The pandemic did not create these inequalities but rather elucidated and exacerbated long-standing gaps in digital access and literacy that persist regardless of the health crisis. Therefore, future strategies must transition from temporary crisis management toward the long-term diffusion of ICT and digital literacy, ensuring that all children, regardless of socio-economic status have the necessary devices, infrastructure, and mastery of digital processes to participate in society. By maintaining support systems like free internet in village halls and amplifying children's voices through platforms for self-expression, policymakers can gain the vital insights needed to prevent further marginalization and ensure equitable access to education and opportunity in a world where technology is a permanent pillar of social life.

Second, in their stories, Banyumas children represented various challenges and difficulties in the midst of a pandemic, but most tried to respond positively to challenges. The research arrives at its conclusions through a systematic close reading of the *Sejuta Cerita Anak Banyumas* anthology, which provides direct qualitative evidence of how children in a high-risk region navigated the pandemic's unique challenges. By focusing on this primary source material, the study moves beyond generic observations to document how the "digital native" identity manifested in children's daily lives, revealing that technology served as an integral aspect of their subjectivity rather than just a school tool. This is supported by quantitative data within the narratives, such as the frequent mention of mobile phones and the internet, which underscores that these devices acted as vital emotional instruments for resilience and the creation of creative "novelty output" when physical social routines were disrupted.

Third, the children of Banyumas navigated the pandemic by leveraging their status as digital natives using their inherent ICT literacy to find novelty output and emotional resilience through mobile devices. However, the research reveals that the pandemic was far from a neutral event; it exacerbated structural violence and exposed a complex continuum of digital inequality that extends beyond a simple binary of haves and have-nots. This continuum categorizes youth into the "Haves," who possess the devices, conduits, and literacy to remain productive; the "Marginalized," who face economic barriers like high data costs or broken hardware; and the "Excluded," who suffer absolute digital silence due to a lack of basic infrastructure like electricity. Ultimately, because digital technology has become an integral aspect of defining childhood, these findings underscore that inclusive measures—such as government computer

loans and free village internet—must persist beyond the crisis to ensure equitable ICT diffusion and prevent the permanent marginalization of the most vulnerable children.

Then, this study shows that addressing gaps, inequalities, and entrenchments in the digital divide is essential. In the case of the short stories written by children in Banyumas, Indonesia, the digital divide has played a significant role in shaping their experiences and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The presence of the internet and its devices, such as smartphones and computers, has been crucial for children in their daily lives during the pandemic, but not all children have equal access to information and communication technology (ICT). This has resulted in a diverse range of experiences and perspectives among the children, which are reflected in their short stories. Therefore, it is important to address the issue of digital access and equity to provide children with equal opportunities and amplify their voices and perspectives on critical socio-cultural issues.

As part of a particular generation, children have their way of connecting with the outside world, getting information, or coping with daily challenges. Messages, information, and education on health and well-being will be more effective for children in times of crises, such as pandemics, if delivered in the right and familiar medium. In Banyumas, which is included in the Central Java Province with a high level of digital divide in Indonesia, this should be a concern for policymakers. Several short stories tell that children who have difficulty accessing online schools feel grateful and helped by the computer loans from the government through schools, waivers, and sympathy from teachers, and free internet in public spaces such as village halls. In the digital divide, providing internet access to underprivileged individuals can lead to increased online activity and engagement in various online activities often targeted by access subsidies (Goldfarb & Prince, 2007, p. 15). Moreover, whether accelerated by the pandemic or not, digital technology remains a crucial aspect in defining childhood in the 21st century (OECD, 2019, p. 20). Policies focused on the diffusion of ICT and its literacy in children are essential to close the digital gap in a span of generations. This research is still limited to short stories written by Banyumas children. More extensive research is needed to see how children in Indonesia experience the digital divide.

### ***Author Contribution Statement***

**Aldi Aditya:** Conceptualization and Research Design; Data Curation and Investigation; Methodology; Writing - Original Draft; Writing - Review & Editing. **Wiekandini Dyah Pandanwangi:** Methodology; Project Administration; Writing - Review & Editing; Validation. **Umami Nurjamil Baiti Lapiana:** Project Administration; Formal Analysis and Visualization; Writing - Review & Editing, Validation

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