CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Interpersonal communication, which involves the interplay and sharing of ideas, knowledge, feelings etc. between two or more people, is a key component of human interaction. The process is intricate and incorporates both verbal and nonverbal indicators, such as language, tone, facial expressions, and body language. To establish and sustain relationships, resolve disagreements, and accomplish personal and professional objectives, interpersonal communication is essential (Knapp & Daly, 2011). This form of communication and relationship maintenance play a crucial role in playing trading card games.

Trading card games (TCGs) are a type of game that involves players using decks of collectible cards to compete against one another. TCGs have become increasingly popular in recent years, with games like *Magic: The Gathering*, *Pokémon TCG*, and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* attracting millions of players worldwide. TCGs are more than just a game, however; they are a unique combination of social activity, skill-based gameplay, and collectible hobby (Kuhlemann & Klimmt, 2019). With tons of revenue brought in annually (Khan, 2022), the industry shows no signs of stopping in its growth. Indonesia is not an exception: TCG thrives in Indonesia, with various regions joining in national competitions as evident in the nationwide *Pokémon TCG* tournament (Yuniar, 2022).

Among other elements, the social aspect of TCGs contributes to their appeal (Johnson, 2019). TCGs often require players to gather in person, which can result in the development of tightly-knit communities revolving around the game. The emergence of friendships, rivalries, and even love connections may result from this social factor. TCGs also provide a distinctive fusion of collectible hobby and skill-based gaming. To build a powerful deck and outsmart their opponents, players must employ strategic thinking and decision-making while simultaneously partaking in the pastime of collecting and trading cards (Lenhart, *et al*., 2008). TCGs as a genre of tabletop gaming began with the advent of *Magic: The Gathering*.

Magic: The Gathering, sometimes known as MTG, is a well-known TCG brand that served as a model for future brands. With its commercialization and collecting strategy, it established the norms for others that came after. The game gained enormous traction (Duffy, 2015) and inspired a ton of other trading card games, such *Pokémon TCG* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, both of which later rivaled their predecessor in terms of popularity (Dornbush, 2021). The game blends a deep strategic layer with fun gameplay elements. MTG has made a name for itself as a social pastime that encourages face-to-face interactions between players, fostering friendship and community development (Woods, 2012).

The game has various formats, each one following different sets of rules and restrictions despite using mostly the same card pool. Elder Dragon Highlander (EDH), sometimes called Commander, is an MTG format that emphasizes the social aspect specifically. In the multiplayer game of EDH, which is often played with four players, each player gets a deck of 100 unique cards, the commander of which is a legendary monster. Players bargain, form alliances, and chitchat as part of the social interactions that are fundamental in EDH. The community spirit and regulations of EDH encourage a setting that values social interaction just as much as the game itself (Voida, *et al.*, 2010).

Additionally, MTG, and more especially the EDH format, has proved helpful in promoting interpersonal interactions and social skills. Players gain strategic thinking abilities via gaming interactions, as well as bargaining and communication skills. Local gaming shops that organize MTG tournaments serve as social centers and are important gathering places where players may trade cards, discuss strategy, and form relationships (Carter, *et al.*, 2012). The friendships and communities formed around MTG, especially EDH, go beyond the confines of the game and provide players with a feeling of community and shared identity.

To comprehend how people engage and communicate across diverse channels, it is essential to understand the foundational idea of social presence theory. Initially, the Social Presence Theory (Short, *et al.*, 1976) proposed that the medium itself significantly influenced how people felt linked to or present with others during communication. Since then, the notion has developed, and it is now viewed in the context of online and remote interactions as the capacity to present oneself socially and emotionally as a "real" person in a mediated setting (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Adding to this, Biocca (2003) defined social presence as the feeling of being with someone else, which is impacted by both technology and the dynamics of the relationship.

In contrast, the field of computer-mediated communication (CMC) examines human communication using computers or other networked devices. Social interactions within CMC might take the form of audio-video conferencing or text-based communications. CMC has changed over time, and new technological developments have produced more immersive forms of communication that enable a higher level of social presence (De Paolis, 2017). Understanding social presence over CMC is also not an untreaded ground for research, as Gunawardena (1995), Garrison, *et al.* (2000), and Ziegler (2015) noted. However, most researches about social presence over CMC have been focused on directional interactions for ease of control, and research has yet to be done in highly social contexts, such as a gaming session.

The importance of social presence cannot be overstated in the context of gaming, and more especially in the case of Elder Dragon Highlander (EDH), a format within Magic: The Gathering. EDH is essentially social and frequently entails subtle player engagement and communication. In addition to game mechanics, the multiplayer aspect of EDH involves a substantial number of social interactions such as alliance formation, bargaining, and psychological dynamics (Drachen, *et al.*, 2010).

Communication is an essential component of the social structure of gaming communities, as noted by Waskul and Douglass (1996), giving players the ability to

negotiate common meanings and behaviors. In MTG, players must work together to build a shared knowledge of the game's intricate game rules. Among other things, a perception that drives people is their understanding that they are in the presence of other people, which is also known as social presence (Biocca, *et al.*, 2003). In playing a game of MTG, especially the highly social Commander format, social presence is a key component to its enjoyment; however, due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, measures were taken by governments worldwide to curb the spread, one of which is enforced social distancing that made it difficult for players to come and play face-to-face. As a result, players resorted to other methods, including computer-mediated communication.

By investigating how the crucial function of interpersonal communication is replaced in *Magic: The Gathering* and how the community that plays it in Jakarta worked around the hurdle caused by COVID-19 pandemic to achieve the social need to play the game, this thesis seeks to uncover how social presence is felt in these workarounds, how player experiences are influenced by these methods, and at the same time expand knowledge of how social presence is experienced over CMC in highly social contexts, which no previous researches have investigated.

1.2 Problem Identification

Indonesia is a thriving bedrock for TCGs (Yuniar, 2022), and MTG is not an exception. There are various stores and community areas where players gather to play games of MTG with each other along with various other TCGs (Susanti, 2020). With the number of matches, both casual and competitive, the popularity that this genre of tabletop games has in Jakarta cannot be understated. Various tournaments and events are held in TCG stores across the country every year, and the game has a thriving

Facebook market community that allows it to have a local economy in the sale and purchase of cards.
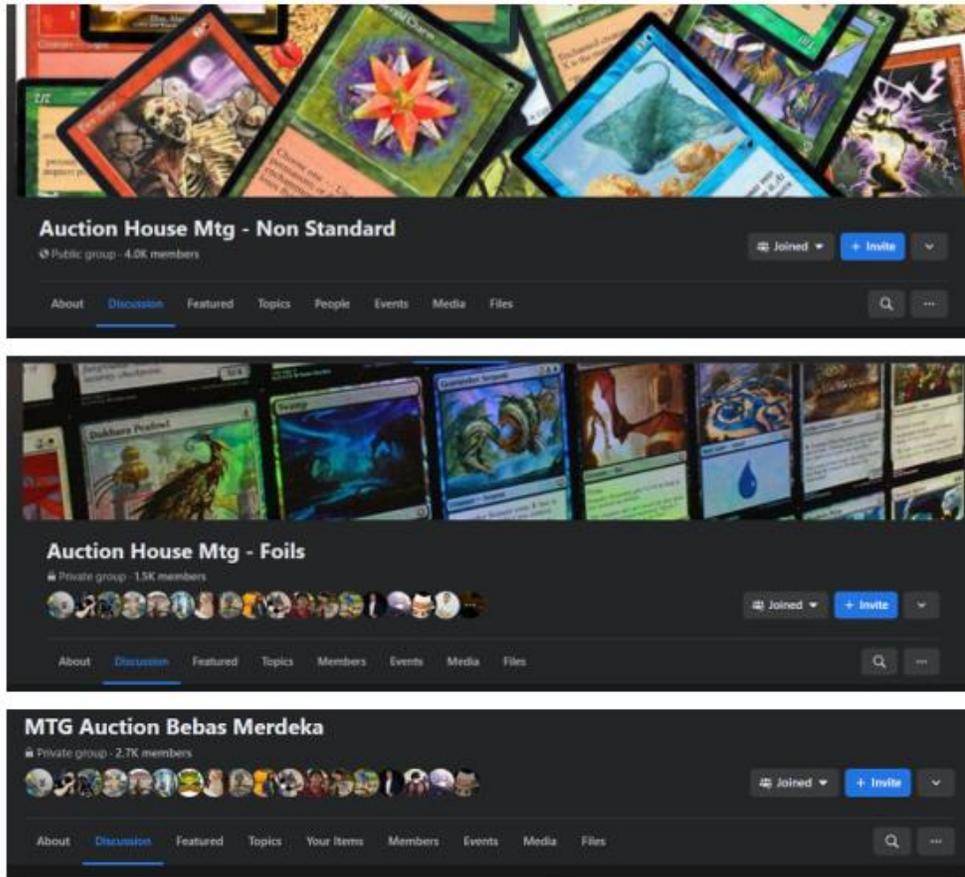
Figure 1. Facebook groups for the sale of MTG cards. Each group has thousands of members and counting. Source: Author, 2023.

Understanding this, it is unsurprising to find that MTG is regularly played in face-to-face (FTF) setting in aforementioned stores all over the country, especially in the capital city of Jakarta. Moreover, due to its highly popular Commander format, which typically involves up to 4 players, MTG is among the most social TCG games there is.
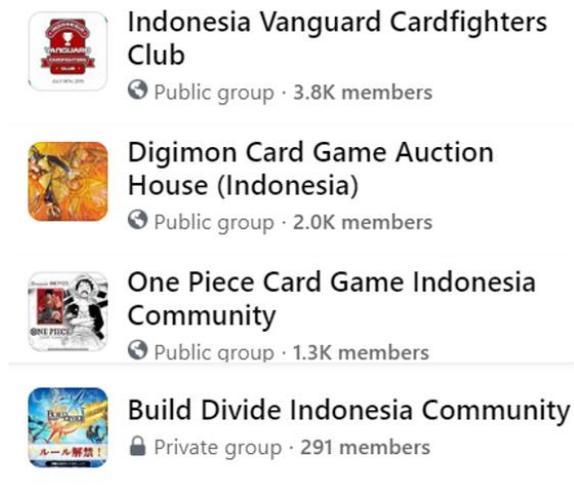
The format requires that each player's deck carries a specific 'Commander' card. The 4-player format makes the game highly social and even political, in which players may work together to eliminate powerful players first and keep the balance of the board stable, allowing for talking and negotiation. This results in a game that heavily favors direct, face-to-face interactions (Hall, 2020), even considering its turn-based competitive gameplay typical of the genre (Yuniar, 2022).

This heavy social element of the game makes social presence a very vital component to its enjoyment, especially thanks to the reduced competitiveness of the format and its focus on the more social and political elements of the gameplay that emerged as the play went (McWhertor & Hall, 2021). In other words, Commander MTG is a highly social game with intense engagements and high social context that could influence not only how a game goes, but also how the game is enjoyed. This element of social presence found no issue in FTF games; however, this changed with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic displaced a lot of industry economically and socially (Aditantri, *et al*., 2021). Unprecedented alterations to daily life brought on by

the COVID-19 epidemic include social isolation policies that have severely reduced face-to-face social connections. The use of electronic media for social connection, such as social networking, video conferencing, and online gaming significantly increased because of the epidemic (Meier, *et al.*, 2021).

Through the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in this manner, however, different people may experience different forms of social presence (Gunawardena, 1995). This particular form of communication may influence the way they experience the very social game that is Commander MTG, and while it is widely known that Commander MTG is a very social game that favors interpersonal interactions (Hall, 2020), there has yet been research into this form of competitive, yet social, form of gaming, specifically through computer media. As such, it is currently unknown whether interacting through CMC provides the necessary experience of social presence that is pivotal in a game of Commander MTG.

Due to its multiplayer character, where politics and diplomacy are as important as the cards themselves, EDH, commonly known as Commander, differs from other MTG formats (Carter, *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, a key aspect of the EDH experience is social presence, which is defined as the degree to which people sense the presence of others in mediated communication (Biocca, *et al.*, 2003). Traditional face-to-face EDH games are replete with social clues, such as verbal exchanges, nonverbal cues, and quick feedback, all of which enhance social presence. As a result, players frequently cite EDH's community and social connections as some of the format's most alluring aspects (Voida, *et al.*, 2010).

The development of technology and the accompanying ascent of online gaming platforms, however, have put traditional notions of social presence to the test. This was made clearer by the COVID-19 epidemic, which compelled people to engage in more online communication. To continue playing EDH, players resorted to a variety of online services, including Discord, SpellTable, and MTG Online (Whiteside, 2015). These systems provided a variety of communication options, including text-based chat and

audio-video conferencing. The change brought up important issues regarding the EDH gaming experience and the degree to which social presence can be maintained or duplicated in a mediated environment.

This topic is suitable for investigation because there is little research particularly examining social presence within the EDH group. Communication technologies can promote social presence to varied degrees, according to earlier research on online gaming (Skalski, *et al*., 2011). The distinctive environment presented by EDH, with its focus on politics and negotiation, creates a unique setting that may affect how social presence is perceived. For instance, it is typical for players to establish alliances or influence others to conduct certain acts in an EDH game. The absence of non-verbal cues in text-based communication may make it more difficult for a player to participate successfully in such social dynamics.

Additionally, a big part of the EDH experience is the sense of community, which is frequently aided by recurring encounters with the same people in nearby game shops or groups (Carter, *et al*., 2012). These communities might grow or contract thanks to online channels. On the one hand, they can link together players from various areas, opening possibilities for a wider range of interactions. On the other hand, the fleeting nature of online contacts could impede the growth of the kind of committed bonds that are frequently at the heart of EDH networks.

MTG as a game, and social presence over CMC, are paths that have been academically treaded before. However, unlike past research, this research specifically aims to understand the experience of online communication, specifically social presence through CMC, in a casual competitive game that heavily favors social interaction, which is MTG of the Commander format.

1.3 Problem Statement

This paper seeks to address the following question: how is social presence experienced through computer-mediated communication in remote plays of *Magic: The Gathering* during the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.4 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to understand social presence in computer-mediated communication during the COVID-19 pandemic by *Magic: The Gathering* community in Jakarta.

1.5 Scope of Study

This study is conducted specifically in TCG communities that play *Magic: The Gathering* in Jakarta using computer media to communicate and play their games during the pandemic.