



THE EVOLVING MEDIA CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: FAN CULTURE IN ONLINE COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Technology has reformed the way consumers behave. More than influencing factors to buying decision, the study of media consumers has attracted scholars to investigate various subjects related to it. Fan culture has never been this fun back in the days before new media. With the benefit of Internet, fans can be more active in terms of producing and sharing contents and enrich their fan experience. This paper aims to investigate fan practices and experience in an online community as not just media consumers but also producers.

The data for this research were collected through one-month online observation in exochocolate Live Journal community, which is a forum-based community that has been chosen to represent fans in online community. Common practices and characteristics are among the focus chosen to understand the behavior.

This research concludes that various content producing and sharing; including the engagement between the fans forms the fan culture in the community. The shared and common practice such as the style of commenting and the style of organizing posts are the most apparent examples of the self-organizing community. Fans join the community not only to find information and updates but also to share their opinion and feeling and these contribute to their fan experience because they have other fans to interact with.

Abstrak

Teknologi telah mereformasi perilaku konsumen. Banyak faktor yang mempengaruhi keputusan membeli, studi media konsumen telah menarik para ilmuwan untuk menyelidiki berbagai subyek yang terkait dengannya. Budaya penggemar tidak seperti saat ini di masa-masa sebelum era baru media. Dengan manfaat Internet, penggemar dapat lebih aktif dalam hal memproduksi dan membagikan konten dan memperkaya pengalaman penggemar mereka. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki praktik-praktik penggemar dan pengalaman dalam komunitas online bukan hanya konsumen media tetapi juga produsen.

Data untuk penelitian ini dikumpulkan melalui pengamatan online satu bulan di komunitas Live Journal exochocolate, yang merupakan komunitas berbasis forum yang telah dipilih untuk mewakili penggemar di komunitas online. Praktik dan karakteristik umum adalah salah satu fokus yang dipilih untuk memahami perilaku.

Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa berbagai konten memproduksi dan berbagi; termasuk keterlibatan di antara para penggemar membentuk budaya penggemar di masyarakat. Praktik bersama dan umum seperti gaya mengomentari dan gaya posting adalah contoh paling nyata dari komunitas pengorganisasian diri. Penggemar bergabung dengan komunitas tidak hanya untuk mencari informasi dan pembaruan tetapi juga untuk berbagi pendapat dan perasaan mereka dan ini berkontribusi pada pengalaman penggemar mereka karena mereka memiliki penggemar lain untuk berinteraksi.

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INTRODUCTION

In various industries, media and technological development transformed the way consumers behave. How they make a decision in choosing what to buy, or what to consume has evolved as more factors are weighed in. Consumers here are more than buyers, but include media consumers too. Consumer studies have branched out to include fan culture, which is broad area to study since it comprises different elements from individual fan, fan culture, fandom activities, and the social engagement.

Fans and fandom have also shifted in terms of fan activities along with the development of information technologies. The Internet is the main platform for fandom's main activities (Baym, 2007) due to its function enabling people to reach and communicate with each other globally (Fourie, 2007, p. 95), which benefits the fans. Using the Internet, fans are encouraged to participate more in various fan activities, content producing, and experience different kind of engagement with other fans, overall forming an enhanced fan culture.

Popular music is an essential part of people's life. Music industry itself is a big industry built around music consumption, and technologies have affected not only the production and distribution of music but also the consumption. Previously, music fans' social activities were limited to attending concerts or fan club meetings. With the Internet, various fan activities in various sites including social media and online community has made it easier for them to connect. By involving themselves in online fandom, there are there is also higher level of interaction with other fans. Sharing fan related materials between fans has also been made easier now.

Music fans have been around in the social media sites and formed communities online for years. Social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and LiveJournal are among the sites where fans gather and interact with each other. This research focuses on a LiveJournal fan community of a K-Pop performance group, exochocolate. The particular fan group is chosen as an example to represent fans as media consumers and the culture in online community.

The increase in media consumers' participation and change of behavior over the emergence of online media can be examined through various practices and interactions in the fan community, which have developed into a modern fan culture. Furthermore, how the culture of online fan community can enhance fans' experience will also be elaborated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer Behavior

To obtain something that was expected, consumers have to go through a process of receiving information, interpreting, and decision making until they come to the final pick of what to do. Consumer go through several steps and influencing factors in the decision making process (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016, p. 167). With the emergence of social media, consumer behavior and activities have shifted. Higher level of contributions is made online from producing, distributing, and consuming content, which is also affected by their motivations (Heinonen, 2011). These motivations can be internal and external, and it may differ individually.

Through social media, consumers are free to give their opinion and share their experience after consumption. Social interaction online is one of the factors that can affect consumer's decision in which service or brand to use. Furthermore, with them relating and exchanging thoughts with each other, it may give them a community sense, or sense of belonging. A study by Ioanăș & Stoica (2014) supported that 'social networks' becomes an influencing factor of consumer behavior online. Other than social connection, Heinonen (2011) mentioned that consumers' production activities are also



affected by information factor and entertainment factor. Consumers generate content in order to offer information or knowledge to others. Meanwhile the entertainment motive could arise from the need of channeling their creativity and the need of enjoyment, or from wanting to provide some kind of entertainment to others.

The study of consumer behavior these days has expanded to not only covering consumer buying decision, but also about how consumer behavior concept can be applied to understand how people use the media and consume the media product. It is no longer only about personal preference, which guides consumers to choose what media to use, which media to look for. Reasons such as mutual's opinion, friend's recommendation, or current trend about music or video to check out may greatly contribute to one's decision of media consumption.

The complicated nature of consumer behavior these days is enabled by the technological development like social media and how easy it is for consumers to gain information in a short amount of time. Thus it is always an intriguing concept to learn, not just from a management perspective, but also from the media consumers' point of view.

Fans and Fandom

The word fan is an abbreviation of 'fanatic' from the Latin word means the people who are devoted or attached to something/someone (Stadler & McWilliam, 2009, p. 256). A fan or fans, simply refer to an individual or a group of people who take interest in something (music, movie, etc.) or someone (public figure), and become drawn and dedicated to seek information and follow everything related to the thing of interest. Fans are not those who simply enjoy the media but also identify themselves with it, be it media product, idols, or style (Grossberg, et al., 2006). Someone could be a fan of a TV show, drama, movie, sports, music, musicians, actors, singers, or celebrities in general.

Jenkins (1992, p. 56 cited in Gibbs, 2011) and Herrmann (2008) stated that fans' attachment to their emotion and how they are willing to be involved in something they like are what differentiate fans with the casual audience. Furthermore, Grossberg, et al. (2006) added that there is a certain degree of investment that makes someone a fan. Thus fans hold deep attachment towards something. Fan culture is not an exclusive relationship (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 18) meaning someone can be a fan of different music groups, for example, at the same time without being seen as disloyal. However, it is not always the case because in some cases there could be rivalries between different music groups' fans.

A group of fans, the fan practices/activities, and everything around it forms a fandom. Fandom is a term used to refer to a community of fans who share common identity and interest, form relationship through the media consumption, and connected by the shared interest and fan activities (Jenkins, 1992, p. 213). Within music fandom, fan related activities circulate around the music produced and its performers.

Herrmann (2008) discussed about fans' attachment into the fan culture and cited Grossberg, that 'fans use their affective sensibilities to drive their engagements in the culture of popular stars' which will direct their investment in that and into the fandom world, in which it may reflect self identity. Herrmann (2008) also concluded that fandom potentially provides fans with 'energy, activity, and connection' that would create 'meaningful engagement' or experience from the activities. By sharing the similar feeling of excitement towards certain fan activity and interacting with each other, it allows fans to feel attached with each other thus because of the emotional attachment, the things they do may act as positive encouragement.

Media Convergence

Media convergence refers to a process in which the development of telecommunication technologies has eased the access and distribution of media contents



(Jenkins, 2006b, p. 34). It has become easier for people to find and share the information they need with the Internet. Jenkins (2006b, p. 34) also stated that convergence changes the way people consume the media. Various contents can now be created and shared through online media. Additionally, convergence is not only about the technological change but also a cultural shift because people actively try to look for new information and make meanings among different contents available (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 3). People are no longer just consumers of media but have become producers too.

Online media have changed the way people interact with each other and stay connected. It allows higher participation from the users. Baym (2007) mentioned the existence of online fan communities where fans interact with each other displays convergence culture in which they produce and share contents. Besides providing users with digital media consumption, the Internet also enables users, in this case fans, to produce and share content through various sites such as YouTube, blogs, or other social media sites (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 686).

Online Fandom

Online media have shifted the way fandom is experienced since the emergence of social media sites. Wall & Dubber (2008) stated that online media have reshaped the music industry in relation to the fandom and that fandom studies should consider the fans' relationship, the social interaction between fans and their online experience. Therefore, the study of fandom would be better not to only include the offline experience but also the online experience to be able to see the relationship between the fans, their activities, and online media clearly.

Hills (2002 cited in Jenkins, 2006a) stated that the Internet has accelerated fan communication speed and established the term 'just in time fandom' (p. 141) referring to how information can be passed on directly through online sites and fans can generate responses straight after seeing it. The Internet has also made fandom goes global because of its ability to reach fans in different parts of the world and has provided new way of self-experience and forming relationship by social interaction and participatory factor (Lister, et al., 2009) especially those with the same interest. Moreover, different kind of websites for fan activities such as social networking sites (SNS) contributes to the development of online communities (Stadler & McWilliam, 2009, p. 245). By getting involved in the online fandom through social media sites, the fan experience is altered and enhanced. Up until these days, there are a lot of online communities of different fan groups in different online sites like LiveJournal, Facebook, Twitter, or forums thus showing how fans have considered online sites essential.

Fan cultures online comprise a number of fan practices including video sharing/downloading, photos sharing, live streaming, as well as interacting with other fans. It also includes their group characteristics such as their interaction pattern.

Another type of fan practices is producing and sharing fan materials online. The various content created and shared by users online is termed as user generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61) and fans utilize various online sites as a platform for that. Gibbs (2011, p. 19) concluded that the act of producing, discussing, and creating something are among the primary fandom activities and that the purpose has become more than just to seek and follow updates but also for the purpose of enjoyment or pleasure.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Observation can be useful in collecting data about activities. Furthermore, it can benefit the researcher in helping to understand people and their activities (Walliman, 2011, pp. 100-101) in the natural environment. Online observation was used to gain relevant information about the media consumers, in this case fans in online community



and its practices, as well as how their behavior enhances the online fan experience.

The observation took a month to complete and exochocolate LiveJournal community was chosen to represent music fans as media consumers in online community. LiveJournal being a type of blog, with the posts listed in reverse-chronological order (Gibbs, 2011) enables easy organization and monitoring of contents posted (called journal entry), thus it has helped with data collection process. The layout has also helped with observation and keeping track of updates as well as comments posted.

Concerning the ethical concern and authorization, approval has been gained from the Moderator to conduct the research. The primary data was gathered by looking at the entries as well as the comments posted on the entry within the data collection period. The researcher recorded the entries posted daily and noted the various content posted including the comments, which was kept in a diary/journal like entry to organize the data. The entries with the high number of comments and the various types of entries posted were noted for analysis. Additionally, the organization of posts and type of comments were also carefully looked through.

Secondary data was obtained through literature study to obtain references from various sources including books and journals, related to the topics, specifically about online community and the media consumers.

The data analysis was done after the observation period through content analysis to better grasp the pattern and behavior of fans in the online community. The type and content of the journal entries posted, the way it is organized, and the entries with the most replies/comments became the focus to use for further analysis. Different types of behavior, which can be seen through the replies or posts made by the members, as well as the replying and posting style in the community were also noted to categorize the various activities and different level of participation by the fans in the community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Fan Practices Media Consumers & Producers

Various online fan activities were observed in the community, including creating new entry and posting comments and different type of contents. Fans are allowed to create a new post as long as they abide to the community rules created by the Moderators. Anything that is 'news' or new information or update can be posted by providing the source. Official news, event updates, to social media updates can be posted in there.

Besides creating new entry, the fans were also seen actively posting comments on the entry. Some are more active compared to the others in commenting and there are also users who created more entries compared to the rest. Those who create new entry and comment create and share contents to others. An entry or comment can consist of any content from article/news, video, photo, gif, or combination of those.

Fans comment in the entry posted to express their opinion towards content posted relates to Jenkins's interpretive community point (Jenkins, 1992, p. 210) because those comments are a form of interpretation and thoughts that arise after consuming the media. One example where interpretations come together is in the new release entry such as new music video entry. Various opinions were posted about the visuals, the video setting, and the choreography with some comments having similar opinion.

Besides content in a form of text, there were also fan arts and fan made videos posted in the community. Jenkins's argument about fans as active consumers challenges Theodor Adorno's argument, in his study of the loss of classical music to popular culture (1991 as cited in Galloy, 2012), that the mass produced popular culture turned consumers passive and that texts lose meaning through over-consumption of popular culture and took example of fans creating artwork leads to disintegration of cultural text.



His argument was criticized by some including Jenkins in which he stated that fans' interpretation toward certain popular culture can only gain meaning even if it is only relevant to fans themselves and that fans can create depth to it thus adding it value (Galloy, 2012). Furthermore, the fact that fans recreate and reproduce meaning through art works and interpretation makes fans as active audiences. In addition to that, the self-produced art showed fan creativity and how they recreate something for a form of entertainment for the group enjoyment.

How fan arts are shared and enjoyed in exochocolate supports Jenkins' (1992, p. 211) point about how fandom facilitates the display and promotion of fan arts. Photo edits and moving image (GIF) taken from the published content in the community (for example a scene from a music video) are among the various fan arts posted to complement the text post, as a way to express their feeling toward something more strongly.

Different fan activities such as posting an entry, posting comment and replying to other's comment, and creating and sharing content are the example of how fans in the community engage with each other and being active consumers, which also produce and share their own contents.

Online Community's Self-Organized Characteristic

Exochocolate as a fan community has specific characteristics that differentiates it with other online fan communities and based on the observation, there are interesting characteristic and practices in exochocolate. The characteristic of exochocolate can be looked upon factors like the type of entry posted, how do fans organize and post the entry, or is there any specific practice the fans do.

Every week there will be a special entry called a weekly 'catch up post', which is organized in a way so that fans who are busy during the weekdays or missed some updates can check for updates for that whole week easier (performance, social media update, and so on) because every entries created on that week are linked there (Image 1).

Jenkins (2002, p. 2) stated that online fan community portrays what Levy (1997) termed as 'self-organizing groups focused around the collective production' and 'circulation of meanings and interpretations' towards popular culture contents and the community implements such practice through the organization of the posts and its display. The community is built through collective production in a way that fans are allowed to contribute in a different way from creating an entry and sharing new updates to just simply commenting or adding more information in the comment section.

In addition, similar style in organizing posts is apparent. They organize it neatly especially when different media contents posted in the original entry. Spoiler links for multiple photos and videos are also used to comply with the rules of the online community (maximum of 1 image or video outside the spoiler links), which is to prevent having a long entry thus cluttering the page. Every entry created should also be tagged according to the content to make it easier for others who want to find specific type of content, for example: social media, video, or photo. Such practice also supports Baym's (2010, p. 77) claim about how routinized behaviors or practices are shared in online community.

Exochocolate's characteristics as a community are not only about the special way they organize or create the posts but also the various type of entries posted, which have become a common, shared practice.



Image 1. Weekly Catch Up Entry Screenshot

Enhanced Fan Experience through Online Community

Being in a fan community means fans would have others who share the same interest toward something. Being able to share and discuss something with others contribute to the overall fan experience because in reality it is better to have another person or more with the same interest with whom they can talk to and be excited with.

New releases such as MV, new performance, new video/photo update, are often eagerly anticipated and shared thus the larger number of comments in the respective entry. Based on the observation, the most obvious proof of fans having fun with all the sharing and excitement is shown in the live streaming post, when there is a new release or live event happening, just by looking at the number of comments posted.

As mentioned above, shared unique practices are present within the community. A lot of comments using big font or sparkly text and gif usage to express the strong feeling of excitement and enthusiasm is another example of that. A fandom term representing such feeling is 'spazzing'. Usually the spazzing comment is marked with big sized font, sparkly text, random keyboard smash (i.e. HGKLASDLKJAS / Image 2). Fans are no longer just a simple receiver of media, but they seek to channel their feeling from consuming the media to others through activities like spazzing, in which help them connect and engage with others.

Such practice enables fan to share excitement with others of anticipating something new thus it can enhance their fan experience. The experience created from sharing excitement supports Stadler & McWilliam's (2009, p. 259) opinion about how fans are actively engaging in fan activities to contribute in the community. For fans, just



simply consuming the media is not enough. There is a tendency to be actively involved. Therefore, the emotional relationship such as pleasure or satisfaction developed from media consumption (Grossberg, et al., 2006, p. 262) as well as creation in the community as a sharing platform accommodate to the fan experience and formed the fan culture. Fans want to be excited together and feel excited together, which is what the online community gave them.

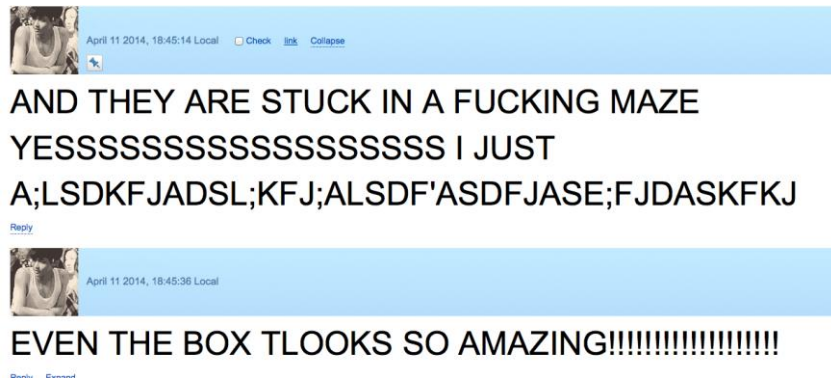


Image 2. Fan's spazzing comment with uppercase letters and keyboard smash

The fan culture can be seen not only through what are shared and discussed, but also through how the fans manifest their feeling and their interest through various forms from texts, to pictures, in which they ensure so that others can feel the excitement and that their feeling is recognized.

Exochocolate is built on fans' contribution in sharing updates. Levy (1997 cited in Jenkins, 2006a, p. 139) mentioned about collective intelligence, referring to the knowledge available to the community members. Fans post various updates and it becomes a collective knowledge after it is posted in the community and viewed by other fans. Thus, the community was built upon the collective intelligence resulted from fans' collaboration to continuously updates information.

Being in the community further enables fans to produce and share contents and exchange knowledge, opinion, and feeling with others besides consuming the media. Moreover, they feel invested through their contribution and interaction. The fan culture is formed partly by the way these fans behave within the community. To be able to better express their feeling and reaction, and bond through the community creates pleasure that contributes to the experience as well as the overall culture in the media consumers, or in this case, fandom.

As mentioned before related to consumer behavior, social connection as well as community sense do contribute as a factor influencing how they behave. In this case, the feeling established from connecting with each other becomes the drive for them to participate in the community.

CONCLUSION

The Internet has reconstructed the way media are produced, distributed, and consumed. The emergence of social media/networking sites has reconstructed the media consumers' behavior. Fans as media consumers can easily connect with other fans, as well as produce and share their self-produced content through the online community. All of the interactions from the media consumption produced various interpretation among fans. Therefore, online community is a platform for fans to create meaning and share it with others.

Fan culture is established through the pattern of communication, shared



practices and interactions among the community. Some level of shared practices that is related to self-organization can be seen in the way the posts are shared and displayed in the online community. Such practice helps the community appear organized and neat, as well as making it easier for others to come and find information or content they need. Additionally, the way they share their excitements about new content is also similar in style. Being in an online community enhances fan experience in a way that there are other fans to share feeling with. It is a kind of pleasure when fans can be excited about something they love with other fans since it validates their feelings.

Fans in the online community are actively participating in media consumption, media creation, and media sharing due to the features provided in the online platform. These fans are able to share their interpretation and make meaning together through online community. Being a part of it also elevates their overall fan experience from the shared enthusiasm as well as the shared characteristics among fans. Moreover, while they seek entertainment through being a fan, the online community provides them additional gratification. The contentment resulted from the activities and interaction, is what makes the community a special place for them. Even though everyone's style varies a bit, they share similar traits in how they appreciate the media and their shared interest in the platform.

Considering the wide subject to cover related to consumer behavior, especially media consumers and fans, there are many opportunities to undertake future researches. Investigating fan culture from look from different online platform such as Twitter, or for different segment of fandom, such as sport can be done. Additionally, further research with different scopes, for example the commercialization potential of arts or content created, the effect of being involved in fan culture to one's entrepreneurial skill, managerial approaches related to the online behavior of consumers, and the management side of fan community are among the potential themes that can be explored and developed.

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