

Identity Construction of Fans: Virtual Community Through Chat Room LINE (Case Study EXO-L Bandung Community)

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Abstract

For fans outside of South Korea, the existence of social media can open the possibility to follow all their idol activities and express their identity as fans freely because not all community can accept them. LINE is a medium of information exchange that forms a fan culture as a form of identity consumption of the fans. This research uses a qualitative method with Creswell's constructivism paradigm discussing identity construction among members of Bandung EXO - L community. LINE chat group is a discussion forum to learn how to support idols by conducting virtual fangirling activities that become the lifestyle of community members. Thus, the community environment shapes both verbal and non-verbal communication between community members. This has an impact on the emergence of loyal and active feelings possessed by community members. This loyalty is interpreted as obligations for fan identity because consuming EXO related stuffs is not only based on the work produced, but as an absolute identity.

Keywords: fan, culture, virtual communities, identity consumption, LINE.

Introduction

The existence of social media makes people aware of the identity owned that each person indirectly. This situation raises awareness that it is possible for one to have more than one identity. Jannah (2014) explains that identity is an individual awareness to place oneself and give meaning to himself appropriately in the context of future life which becomes a whole and continuous self-image to find true identity. One of identities is a fans. According to Jenkins (1992, p.12), fans come from abbreviations from the word "fanaticus" to "fanatic". Fans means worship; a follower; waiter. From the definition, fans, especially K-POP fans, have a negative image in public perspective. Therefore, individuals have difficulty expressing themselves as fans because not all environments can accept that identity. As a result, social media is a tool that gives freedom to express themselves.

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LINE became the choice of EXO boyband fans in Bandung as a means of communicating with their fellow community members. They called themselves EXO – L Bandung. The origin of this community name was taken from the name of EXO – L which is the official name of EXO fans then they combined it with their domicile, Bandung. It established since 2012 and having a myriad of achievements such as the "Best Fandom" Award at the 2016 SMTown Gathering and Happy K-POP New Year 3 2016, EXO – L Bandung became one of the largest communities in Bandung with 347 members in the LINE chat group.

Unlike WhatsApp, name and photo of the account will appear in LINE when chatting without having to open profile. LINE have unlimited number of letters which is different from Twitter makes LINE able to accommodate their communication needs of community members. LINE also has various emoticons to express their opinions. LINE provide it with EXO theme which makes their interaction between members is more real. It has ability to store their download files and streaming links on the group timeline. It makes for members to receive EXO files easier. Thus, LINE is able to accommodate EXO fans in Bandung to be free to express their identity.

From here, there are fans culture which is contain values that come from the process of interaction. It exists between members continuously. Fans culture forms the community itself includes information about EXO members' daily lives, sharing photo content, videos, EXO links, EXO's latest projects (album, drama, duet, votes for awards), and fans projects (donations for disaster victims). The culture of fans in the community influences the lifestyle lived by fans from their activities, interests, and opinions, all of which are always related to EXO.

Based on the explanation, community members rebuild the meaning of the fans identity that they have as EXO fans according to fans culture that applies in the community environment. This article discusses the construction of fans' identities in the LINE chat group of Bandung EXO – L community.

Literature Review

Finamore and Barki (2011) explained that virtual communities consist of individuals with shared likes, common goals, information and participating in social interactions. McMillan & Chavis (1986) explain that Sense of Community is a feeling where a group of people feel they belong to one another, and feel dependent on each other, and believe that their needs will be fulfilled through a commitment of togetherness. Elements of the formation of a sense of community are membership, influence (a sense of importance, making a difference for an important group and group for its members), strengthening, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional relationships.

Paez & Albert (2012) explained that cultural consciousness produces an extension of more understanding and development of culture about individuals and other contexts as a process of developing cultural awareness within oneself. Furthermore, Paez & Albert (2012) states that individuals or groups may not be consciously aware of these cultural which in turn will affect the practice of learning and teaching.

Jenkins (Raharja, 2013) explains that Fans culture is formed by the participatory culture of the fans in the struggle to be close to the people they admire. This is what happen to the group. Even though the members are not aware of it, it appears from their lifestyle. Solomon (Suryani, 2013) Lifestyle can be interpreted as how someone spends the time (activity), what is the most important people consider in the environment (interest), and what people think about themselves and the world around (opinion).

According to Lewis (1992), individuals who join a community will build a self-identity that is in harmony with the community environment for themselves. Fans culture of the community forms verbal and nonverbal communication behavior. Mulyana (2010) further explained that verbal is all kinds of symbols that use one word or more or the efforts carried out relating to other people verbally through the use of language. Jenkins (1992) explains that fans culture is a culture of consumption and production. Baudrillard (2015) explains that consumption is a system that carries out signs or groups of groups. Individuals or groups perform exchange functions which are dominated by use values and exchange rates in the form of signs. Sless (1981) explains that visual communication is a series of processes for delivering information or messages to other parties with the use of imaging media that are only read by the sense of sight.

Methods

This is qualitative research. Satori and Komariah (2010, p.22) explains the most important thing about an event / phenomenon / social phenomenon is the meaning behind the event which can be used as a valuable lesson for the development of a theoretical concept.

The paradigm in this journal is constructivism where Creswell (2014) confirms the assumption that individuals always try to understand the world in which they live and work and develop subjective meanings of their experiences - meanings which is directed at objects - certain objects or objects.

Creswell (2014) explains the main purpose in the use of construction is to try to interpret or interpret the meanings that others have about the object under study. Basically, what creates meaning is the social environment which is arising within and outside of interactions with fellow humans.

Result and Discussion

The Role of Communities to form Fans culture among member

Finamore and Barki (2011) explained that virtual communities consist of individuals with shared likes, common goals, information and participating in social interactions. Community members interact about their idols or events starring idols. LINE is a forum for exchanging information, because there isn't a fan who know everything about her idol. Indirectly, members develop emotional closeness because they feel similarities or sense of community.

McMillan & Chavis (1986) explain that Sense of Community is a feeling where a group of people feel they belong to one another, and feel dependent on each other, and believe that their needs will be fulfilled through a commitment of togetherness. Elements of the formation of a sense of community are membership, influence (a sense of importance, making a

difference for an important group and group for its members), strengthening, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional relationships. In a community, the feeling of being interdependent to get info about EXO happens to members:

“...sekarang tu sebenarnya gampang nyari info, istilahnya kayak nyamperin sendiri infonya...di grup pada share” (wawancara Ima pada 22 Agustus 2022)

“Biar ngga keteteran kalo nyari info, em..saling tukar euforia gitu sama temen – temen, misal dapet foto baru siapa gitu kayak yang ‘ini ganteng gitu – gitu, dia lucu gimana – gimana’, jadi kayak saling berbagi kebahagiaan gitu ya ke temen segrup” (wawancara Nung pada 15 Agustus 2022)

“Setelah gabung komunitas, jujur aku tuh lebih update karena biasanya ngga pernah pas kuliah tu tau info, malah kalo di grup tuh kayak berita A gini – gini, voting pun aku tahunya dari mereka” (wawancara Ute pada 23 Agustus 2022).

The community has an important influence in meeting the information needs of EXO for members and forming emotional relationships with a sense of sharing experiences and having the same commitment as EXO fans through LINE chat group interactions. Through interaction with the LINE chat group, the group members interpreted other members' action as knowledge about how to become an EXO fan in accordance with the community environment known as cultural consciousness. Paez & Albert (2012) explained that cultural consciousness produces an extension of more understanding and development of culture about individuals and other contexts as a process of developing cultural awareness within oneself. Furthermore, Paez & Albert (2012) states that individuals or groups may not be consciously aware of these cultural which in turn will affect the practice of learning and teaching.

Jenkins (Raharja, 2013) explains that Fans culture is formed by the participatory culture of the fans in the struggle to be close to the people they admire. This is what happen to the group. Even though the members are not aware of it, it appears from their lifestyle. Solomon (Suryani, 2013) Lifestyle can be interpreted as how someone spends the time (activity), what is the most important people consider in the environment (interest), and what people think about themselves and the world around (opinion). The activities carried out by the community members were to find and share information about EXO, stream and download music videos, photos, concerts or vote. The example of the activity is when FIFA held a poll or chatting with fellow community members on LINE (activity). Below is a conversation about the vote for FIFA in April 2018,

“Ayo semangat vote lagi EXO turun lagi guys...terus vote yaaa waktu tinggal 11 jam buat vote EXO Power” (Aliya Devi Ramantya)

“Aku udah bikin 34 akun...sekarang udah ngga bisa bikin lagi □ tp gap greget” (Ica)

“yoo ayooo vote power” (Lestari)

They always talk about EXO and use bias (favorite members) in EXO on their profile photos or LINE account pages (interest).

Figure 1: Share photo and files through EXO– L Bandung Chat Group between members



By doing online support and using EXO photos as a profile picture of LINE accounts, they have a sense of pride in their identity as fans. Here's the conversation of community members in the LINE chat group:

“Kalian ngebayangin ngga sih sekarang 9 member lagi ada di tempat yang sama sambil ngeliat hasil vote kita dan saling berpelukan...sumpah yaa bahagiaaaa”
(Ghesti P. Maryono)

“Alhamdulillah kerja keras kita terbayarkan” (Istifahani)

The community creates something habitual in the form of online activities of a fan through cyberspace that can freely communicate with other fellow fans about his idol. This situation often called fangirling (for female fans) or fanboying (for male fans) (Raharja, 2013). Fangirling has become a fan lifestyle.

Construction of Community Member Identities: Verbal and Nonverbal

Community members rebuild their identities as fans by incorporating a community fan culture in daily activities reflected in the lifestyle they live. According to Lewis (1992), individuals who join a community will build a self-identity that is in harmony with the community environment for themselves. Fans culture of the community forms verbal and nonverbal communication behavior.

Mulyana (2010) further explained that verbal is all kinds of symbols that use one word or more or the efforts carried out relating to other people verbally through the use of language. Bandung EXO - L community members use languages that are only understood by community members, for example some Korean words in conversations such as'

annyeonghaseyo,'oppa','chukkae' or terms understood by EXO fans such as "LS" or "lightstick", "vote", "SM", "umin", "uco", and "icing".

"Aku meneteskan air mata ngeliat icing ☐" (Ghesti P. Maryono)

Each community member usually has their favorite EXO member or is called a bias. They began to identify EXO members as the ideal type of man with the mention of 'my husband' or 'oppa' (Korean for boyfriend). Here's the conversation of community members in the LINE chat group:

"Jangan ambil umin oppa akuuu" (Mischa)

"Sumon para istri icing" (Dessy Puspita)

*"...beda 6 tahun 5 bulan 2 hari sama suami, AKU ISTRI SAH ZHANG YIXING"
(Ghesti P. Maryono)*

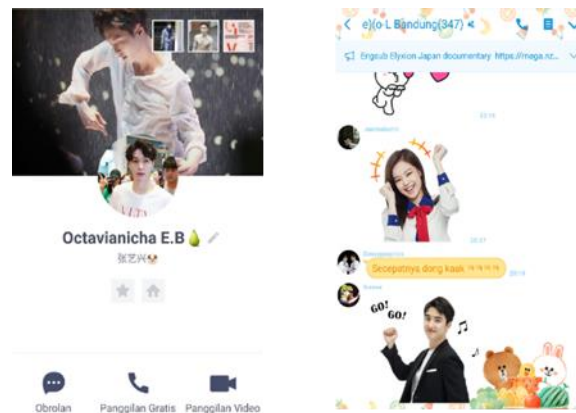
Loyalty is also implied from mutual reminders to support EXO. We could take an example when FIFA opened a poll for songs to be played during the 2018 World Cup final, Bandung EXO-L chat group starts sharing about how to vote via Twitter and Instagram until polling result was announced and Power song managed to reverberate at the 2018 World Cup event.

"Masih gap 1%" (Yuli)

Besides verbal behavior there is also nonverbal behavior which is defined as human action in the form of signals, not words. Mulyana (2010) explain that nonverbal communication includes all stimuli (except verbal stimuli) in a communication setting, which is produced by individuals and the use of environment by individuals, which has a potential message value for the sender or recipient.

Symbols as nonverbal forms play a very important role in showing their identity as fans of EXO. For example, fans use bias images or favorite EXO members for their LINE photo profile or homepage and use LINE stickers with EXO and fangirl members to describe the feelings or responses of community member chat.

Figure 2: LINE photo profile with EXO theme and stickers (Source: LINE group EXO – L Bandung)



Fans Representation: Only Identity Consumption?

Fans are people who hunt for meaning in cultural products. In this case, members of the EXO-L Bandung community interpret themselves as fans. Jenson divides the typical types of fan pathology, namely, individual and obsession. Fans are understood as passive victims who only consume mass media. Jenkins (1992) explains that fans culture is a culture of consumption and production.

Baudrillard (2015) explains that consumption is a system that carries out signs or groups of groups. Individuals or groups perform exchange functions which are dominated by use values and exchange rates in the form of signs. In the logic of signs, objects are no longer associated with real functions or needs but rather as rationalizations for other purposes based on unconscious social coercion.

EXO - L Bandung community members not only consume information in the form of photos and videos or all things in the form of visuals contained in the LINE chat group, but also they produce text through online activities or fangirling as their lifestyle. It creates verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors as previously explained. They are motivated by fellow community members to do every activity. It happened because they want to be participant or to be considered as part of the community. So, actually there are unconsciousness of social coercion which comes from the community environment.

The existence of such communication behavior is the result of 'imagination performance' within the community members through LINE chat group. Their imagine that support EXO's activities as part of their passion for EXO and consider themselves to be the most important figure of EXO's career. This is also foundation to improve fans' image in society through online activities. Thus, visual communication occurs in the LINE chat group.

Sless (1981) explains that visual communication is a series of processes for delivering information or messages to other parties with the use of imaging media that are only read by the sense of sight. Through the LINE chat group with all the content contained in it such as

photos and videos, visual consumption and mass text occur for community members as a cultural activity or fan culture that applies to the community.

Community members get information about EXO continuously within a certain period of time as a form of consumption of identity as a fan where they interpret themselves as individuals who like the physical form possessed by EXO.

"Kemaren liat paha dia rasanya pengen remes...lebih lucu haha...aku liat baik, pertama langsung fokus pahanya, semox bener dah haha...." (Friska)

"tapi endut gemes bgt ih sukak ☺" (zhbil)

"tampannya suamiku" (Ghesti P. Maryono)

Moreover, they also interpret the identity of fans as loyal and active figures. Henry Jenkins (1992) explains that fans are abbreviations of the word "fanatic" which comes from the word "fanaticus" which has the original meaning of worship; waiter; a follower. So, based on that meaning, fans have negative meanings. Through the existence of these virtual communities, they want to show that give support to EXO didn't have correlation on fanatic ways. Because, they have activities aimed at helping others like do fundraising activities for earthquake victims at Lombok where EXO - L Bandung also participated through larger community, EXO - L Indonesia which has been integrated with the Indonesia EXO - L community.

This is possible with internet that unites individuals without geographical boundaries. It is easier for fans to give support to fellow human beings in need, not only to EXO where they are free to share certain photos, videos, links or links that have been translated in English or Indonesia (previously only available Korean-language articles on Korean news portals such as Naver, Daum, Instiz, Pann).

Thus, the existence of the internet which facilitates various social media including LINE where community chat groups are located, gives individuals freedom to channel their passion for EXO without worrying about the fanatical views of the outside community. Fans express themselves in LINE chat groups and consider it as "support for EXO". This represents how fan life is formed by the community environment such as "loyal and active" as the meaning of cultural activities carried out by community members. This is the identity consumed in the reality of consuming media where there are texts and symbols that form their identity as fans.

This has an impact on social change through technology that is capable of rapidly duplicating information and allows individuals not only to act as "consumers" but have the power to become "producers" of information and online activities or fangirling. This is a fans culture in the community that aims to show its identity as a fan of using text and emojis.

Conclusion

In digital era like today, everything in the form of virtual things is close to individual life, as well as members of the community who have LINE chat group environment. Through their interactions is made by fellow community members, everyone on the virtual community group

learn how to interpret themselves as fans to become part of the community as a whole. The community forms a fan identity that is owned by the individual in it and the result is that each individual has feelings towards EXO in the form of an obligation to always show support for EXO. This support can be seen from communication activities carried out in chat groups and formed on images of "important figures that bring about idol success" owned by community members. This emerges a sense of loyalty and active meaning by community members as the fan identity of each individual caused by consumption of items related to EXO. Consumption is not only performed due to the work produced, but also as an absolute identity where in fact there is no such thing. Thus, everything done by community members is sometimes not understood by someone or group that is not from the community environment.

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