

THE CULTURAL ECONOMY OF VIRTUAL KOREAN CELEBRITY INDUSTRY IN TWITTER: A FANDOM STUDY OF KOREAN CELEBRITY ROLEPLAYER IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

Roleplay is a fan activity in which a fan plays a role of their favorite celebrity sustainably in their everyday online-life; this activity is initially meant to provide a fan service for fellow fans who want to have an interaction with their idol. Roleplaying is then developed to be not simply providing conversation between 'pseudo-idol' and fans but also gradually setting a certain celebrity system that is mimicking the real-world celebrity industry complete with its detailed official institutions. Using virtual ethnography approach, the writer analyzes the roleplaying activity as fan production that forms the alternative version of real-life phenomenon with Fiske's Cultural Economy of Fandom and Jenkins' Textual Poachers as the theories to analyze this phenomenon. Throughout this research, the writer discovered that Korean celebrity fans use roleplaying not only as the means to experience celebrity interaction but also to deal with their inability to access the official culture of their object of adoration and also to gain social prestige where they can assert themselves as 'valuable', rebutting the society's stereotypes of fan which often see fans as devalued. By developing the roleplaying world in Twitter (through creating multifarious activities for roleplayers that answered roleplayers' demand), these fans show how they are able to challenge the existing culture.

Keywords: Agency; Roleplay; Twitter; Celebrity

1. Introduction

Roleplay is a fan activity where someone pretends to be a character that they idolized—in sum, they play a role. In fandom world, celebrity roleplaying not only can be done in theatrical stage act (live performance), but also be done in the world of cyber, that is through social networking website's account. In this research, the media that is chosen as the sample is Twitter and blog because in Twitter the interaction is more rapid and intense while the blog is the supporting element to the Twitter account that cannot be left behind since it contains information that corresponds to what is happening in the Twitter account of the roleplayers. Twitter also picked as the chosen platform because Twitter's original style of posting is limited only for 140 character per tweet(posts in Twitter), it makes posts in Twitter more like short narratives or conversations—compared to other roleplaying platform such as Facebook and Tumblr which enable the roleplayer to post much longer postings (sometimes even long note about their 'life'), in Twitter the roleplayers' posts more like direct conversation with their 'fans', which agrees with roleplaying's original attempt: to form a fan service from the previously unreachable celebrities.

The emergence of roleplaying activity can be considered as the act of Jenkins' Textual Poaching that was done by fans of media fandom. As Jenkins stated in his book *Textual Poachers : Television Fans and Participatory Culture* that the textual poachers have a role in encouraging viewer activism, functioned as an interpretive community, have a particular traditions of cultural production, and have a status as an alternative social community (Jenkins, 1992); these roleplaying activists are appropriate with those qualifications—their roleplaying activity encourage more people to involve in the roleplaying community, they interpret the means of roleplaying, they produce new cultural elements in fandom territory, and they are also an alternative social community since the roleplaying community usually has an unconventional form of community—they only exist online, because they kept their offline identity as a secret. The term "Poaching" itself, according to Michel de Certeau (1984) is "an impertinent raid on the literary preserve that takes away only those things that are useful or pleasurable to the reader". Here the poachers takes 'celebrity life' as the object to be played with, building a cyber-reality where they can interact with people as if they were celebrities—busy 'recording songs', 'preparing for a next show', and so on. Their interaction through Twitter with common people transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed a new culture and a new community, as also noted by Jenkins (1992). It also triggered the formation of Benedict Anderson's idea of "*imagined communities*" (1991), where everybody actually never meet each other, but they consider themselves as the member of same community.

I choose Korean celebrity roleplaying as the object here not only because the influence of Korean Wave which is considered as 'world's most talked about phenomenon of the past ten years' (Morris cited in Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008). Actually there are also roleplayers who roleplay celebrities from other countries than Korea, but these 'celebrities' are far less active than their fellow 'Korean celebrities'. The Korean Wave helped to create very loyal fans of Korean pop culture with its pleasure will take part in any fan activities, one of which is roleplaying. Korean celebrity roleplayers, who does not have to be a native Korean people, tweets (posting status on Twitter) often times per day and many of them has almost/over than 1000 followers. For example, @abc_RolePlayers as a roleplaying agency have 1198 followers on its Twitter account (28 March 2013) and @rgb_beastdw as one of the roleplayer has 4266 followers on his Twitter account, with average tweets per day reaching the number of 203 tweets(28 March 2013). One Twitter account plays role of one Korean celebrity. These roleplayers tweets not only about what the real celebrity actually do; they also can elaborate their own fancy and tweets about that 'on behalf' of the particular celebrity. For example, Budi as a fan of Super Junior from Indonesia is a roleplayer of Siwon—one of Super Junior's personnel. Besides tweeting about Siwon's daily life (that he knew from many sources of information), Budi has an imagination that someday Siwon would have a relationship with Agnes Monica, his Indonesian favorite singer. Here, Budi as Siwon's roleplayer then tweets about how he want to have a relationship with Agnes and Budi also able to make his 'Siwon' to 'have a relationship' with 'Agnes', both as a roleplay character of course.

The condition of these Indonesian roleplayers where they mimicking the real-life Korean celebrity industry shows their fanaticism. Thus, the activity of the roleplayers become much more multifarious—the roleplayers not only play the roles and run a roleplayer agency, but also formed event organizers, agency searcher, awards—all particularly for roleplayers' reality. This is what Fiske said that fans create a fan culture with its own systems of production and distribution that forms 'shadow cultural economy' (Lewis, 1992). Hence, the existence of such system shows that there is a kind of virtual miniature of the real-world celebrity industry that occur in Korean celebrity roleplaying world.

2. Methodology

Since the object of the study exists in the cyber world (in the internet) and to acquire more information from the culture's performer, thus the suitable methodology that would be applied in this study is qualitative methodology along with virtual ethnography as the research approach. The qualitative methodology is chosen because of its ability to produce in-depth understanding of the cultural process (Pickering 2008 p4). Jensen also agreed that qualitative method is suitable to be employed in researchs that analyzed cultural phenomenon because of its ability to transform "theoretical concepts into empirical, researchable phenomena....perform sampling of cultural settings, communities, informants, locales, periods, and activities." (Jensen, 2002). Virtual ethnography is chosen as the approach since the object of this study is existed in computer-mediated field. Virtual ethnography is (originally) the ethnographic method—originally designed for studying cultures in the physical world—that is used to study cultures in virtual worlds (Boellstroff, et al., 2012). Boellstroff, et al. also stated that in virtual world context they discovered places rich with social interaction, creativity, challenge, and history; thus it makes virtual worlds as vital places of social interaction and cultural activity (Hine, 2005).

Time range of this research is from March 4, 2013 to June 5, 2013 because that was my period of study. Since the 'location' of a Twitter account can be fictional (a person could set a fictional place on their 'Location' slot on their Twitter's bio), so here the writer will use worldwide Twitter users as the population of the research, which is about 200 million users (Holt in www.telegraph.co.uk, 21 Mar 2013). Thus, the writer will use language as the parameter of one's location (if it use Bahasa as its main communicating language, so the owner of that account should be from Indonesia).

In this study, the writer use purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is when the writer selects their sample based on their judgement and the purpose of the study (Rubin, p. 357). According to Rubin, "Although the study findings would not represent any meaningful population, the test run might effectively uncover any peculiar defects in your questionnaire. This situation would be considered a pretest, however, rather than a final study." (ibid.); by using this type of sampling the writer expect to find the most well-known or experts roleplayers, who is significant enough to represent other roleplayers, so that by observing them the writer could uncover their cultural practices. The number of the population that

considered as the sample here consists of four samples which consists of four Twitter account—one roleplayer account (@rgb_beastdw), one roleplayer agency account (@abc_RolePlayers), one agency searcher account (@Search__RP), one event organizer account (@AcaraRP). Each of the webpage chosen here are representing important institution in Twitter's roleplaying world, so here the writer choose the most significant ones—accounts that has most significant number of followers in Twitter and has high activity rate on Twitter. To decide which account that is most significant among the abundant number of worldwide Twitter users to be chosen as the samples of this research, the writer use Twitter's feature of 'Top People' which will filtered most-followed people on Twitter based on keywords that the writer typed (it will appear in order of the number of followers—the more the follower, it will appear on the top of the list). The writer use keywords in order to find the desired accounts because if someone wants to find an account in Twitter he/she must provide certain keyword related with that desired account, as the clue for Twitter's search engine to bring forward some options and eliminate accounts that do not have any relation with the keyword.

The writer then tries to search Top People based on various keywords (corresponding RPW's six important institutions—the writer use keywords because it requires keywords to find certain things on Twitter) such as 'roleplay', 'rp', 'rp agency', 'roleplay base', etc. After getting the list of Top People based on various keywords, to reduce the data the writer counts the activeness of those accounts using Tweetdeck application; the activeness here is determined by how many tweets/postings that each of the account produce per day. Subsequently, the writer will crosscheck the two data that already obtained before in *twitaholic.com*, to check the global rank of those most active and most followed accounts. Accounts with higher global rank then picked as the sample of this study.

The technique of data collection of this study is based on the virtual ethnography approach, which is including capturing screenshots, historical and archival research, and also participant observation (Boellstroff et al. 2012 p113). Capturing screenshots is used to capture webpages of the Twitter accounts and blog which contain important data that can represent the application of cultural economy of fandom—and since the object of this research is Twitter, capturing screenshots here is done as the following action from tracing the timeline of the chosen accounts; tracing day-by-day, hours-to-hours, minute-to-minutes tweets. Historical and archival research is used to acquired information about the development of roleplayer as fans production since the beginning of the phenomena until nowadays.

3. Discussion

Talking about fan productivity, we cannot leave behind the notion of cultural economy of fandom since fan productivity is a part of this idea. Cultural economy of fandom itself is a condition where fans create a fan culture with its own systems of production and distribution (Fiske cited in Lewis 1992, p.30). This cultural economy is separated from the official popular culture industries yet share the same feature with them, which more normal popular culture lacks. If we applied it to the idea of roleplaying, we can see that as a fan culture, roleplay has no legal association with the official cultural industry (the real-life celebrity industry) but yet they share features that the more normal popular culture (the non-fans) lack or less-intense—roleplaying communities are not included in certain celebrities' official fans club but it also serves pleasurable fan activity as those official fans clubs do and normal popular culture (non-fans) do not offer. Here, fans (the roleplayers) then create their own production system and distribution system. Fans formed such things in order to facilitate their needs in running their newly-formed grassroot fan culture. In this research—in the context of celebrity and as an artificial version of celebrity life—roleplay surely needs to form its own system of production and distribution since in real life after a celebrity is being 'produced' they will be 'distributed'; it also happens in the roleplaying world. In RPW (Roleplaying World; from now on the writer will use this abbreviation to refer to the realm of roleplayers) there are not only roleplayer as individual celebrity who are exist in roleplaying world—there also coexist supporting institutions such as agency, agency searcher, and even event organizer. In this research the writer choose to pick 1 individual celebrity, 1 agency, 1 agency searcher, and 1 event organizer as the object of the research; in order to grasp the comprehension of what was it like to live in the RPW through the interaction of those parties.

When the real-life celebrity industry has things like procedures of recruitment and production for records/movies as the part of its production system and also media expose, and brand partnership and particular officers to handle publicity as the tool for distribution, roleplay also has it—only with different goal. While in official industry the goal is commercial success, in roleplay the goal is to be known widely and wider than before—as an individual roleplayer and as part of roleplaying activity. The goal is to be famous—and fame is all the celebrity is about, just like Boorstin's statement that celebrity is also fabricated for the media and evaluated in terms of the scale and effectiveness of their media visibility (cited in Turner, 2004). And since the subject of roleplaying is 'celebrity as a text' not 'celebrity as a tangible person', so here the system of production and distribution become physically different with the real-life celebrity industry. In roleplay, the agency and event organizer are considered as the main drives of the production system, since they are the ones who do the artist recruitment and create events to be joined by the roleplayers. The main idea of production system in roleplaying is that these fans produce the idea of roleplaying and establish certain rules upon it in order to define the roleplaying practice itself. To sum it up, it can be considered that the roleplaying's system of production consists of collective production of roleplayers' activities textual construction (recruitment and event creation are the example of those activities). Just like principal of economy, after producing something someone should find a way to distribute it; so does this roleplaying case. After producing such activities, the roleplayers should find a way to distribute it somewhere—and here they did that by circulating this idea within the fans communities.

As the one which is distributed here is not a tangible object like CD records or celebrity merchandise, the distribution here is not coming out in the form of delivering goods. In roleplay the one which should be distributed is information, that is about the roleplaying activity (which produced by the production system). For the distribution of roleplaying activity, it often occurs in the form of retweeting (re-post) information from agencies/agency searcher/event organizer by any individual roleplayers. By doing so, the information will spread to wider audiences. The distribution system of roleplaying world mostly relies on each of the roleplayer itself, adapting mouth-to-mouth promotion, it appears to resembles 'account-to-account distribution'. In addition to the roleplayers, agency searcher also took important part in this distribution process, for retweeting tweets from roleplaying accounts which needs promotion. Agency searcher accounts are usually followed by many roleplaying accounts (not only the celebrity roleplayers but also roleplaying agencies, event organizers, etc.), so these roleplaying accounts often utilize the merit of agency searcher to promote themselves/their activity.

Back to the idea of fan productivity, Fiske suggests that fan productions could be analyzed using three categories of fan productivity that are semiotic productivity, enunciative productivity, and textual productivity. Fiske himself assumes that any example of fan productivity may well span at all categories that just mentioned above and that he refused any clear distinctions among them (cited in Lewis 1992, p.37). Here the writer will explain evidences of fan productivity in roleplaying world based on each kind of productivity.

Semiotic productivity is the making of meanings of social identity and of social experience from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity (Fiske in Lewis 1992, p.37). The semiotic productivity occurs in roleplaying world mostly occurs in the form of the account's avatar and since semiotic resources are not only images and symbols but also linguistic message it also occur in the used of Han-Geul (Korean alphabet) to write the name in bio and how the roleplayers often did code-mixing between Korean language and Bahasa Indonesia in their everyday interaction with fans and fellow roleplayer. This situation shows that these roleplayers makes meanings of their social identity based on real-life Korean institution's semiotic resources—they borrowed the real-life physical appearance and Korean identity (through language usage, since roleplaying runs mainly in textual basis) to form their own meaning of his roleplaying persona.

Enunciative productivity is when the meanings made are spoken and are shared within a face-to-face or oral culture that take a public form (ibid.). Since roleplaying runs in textual basis, the enunciation is not happen in the audible way or in physical meeting; the enunciation is held in textual form instead. Even though the media is completely different (from direct voice to virtual text) but they actually share the same feature—Twitter's feature make it possible to display conversational texts between two or more

roleplayers (resembling face-to-face communication) and in Twitter everyone can see your tweets (take a public form). In the case of celebrity roleplayer, the enunciative productivity can be found in @rgb_beastdw's daily interaction in Twitter. As a celebrity roleplayer, what he basically do day-to-day is updating news about his 'life' which is generally derived from the real Son Dong-Woon's life, engaging in a fantalk with non-roleplayer fans and interacting with fellow celebrity roleplayers, as 'Son Dong-Woon', of course. The interesting thing that the writer found here is that even though here @rgb_beastdw is positioning himself as 'real Son Dong-Woon', sometimes he consciously update as the 'fake Son Dong-Woon', by consciously stating that he is a roleplayer of Son Dong-Woon. When he construct himself as the 'real' one, he hold the role of the imitation of Son Dong-Woon, but beyond that the writer assumes that he also hold the role of the 'spokeperson' of the real artist since he must updates according to the real-life of that artist. This condition where roleplayers are able to handle such activities while maintaining more than one role shows their fanaticism to their object of adoration. In the case of roleplaying agency, enunciative productivity can be seen from their negotiation with aspiring roleplayers who is in search for vacant character to be played. Besides engaging in a roleplayers' 'recruitment' negotiation, the agency also has the right to ban their members if that member violate the rules that is already established by the agency; without giving precaution. This behavior shows that roleplaying agency has a panoptic role upon their member; whether the members like it or not, they must accept that their activity in RPW is under their agency's surveillance. Panopticon, as been stated by Brunon-Ernst is "a ring-shaped building in the middle of which there is a yard with a tower at the center...In the central tower there is an observer...able to see everything without anyone being able to see him." (2012, p.29). This is corresponds to the existence of the agency, where they can oversee their member whenever they want without being visible to their member. Moving to the next institution, in agency searcher there are many enunciation occur since agency searcher/fan base's job description is not only helping roleplayers and agency to have a deal and reach a consensus but they also often triggers roleplayers to involved in fan forum that they open in their timeline. They also promotes activities from any roleplayers or agencies; this behavior therefore shows that agency searcher holds an important role in the distribution and circulation process in roleplaying world. The last institution, which is event organizer, regarding with enunciation mostly can be found in the interaction between administrators of @AcaraRP and the clients and the guests; it can be during the wedding ceremony or when during event preparation. The use of hashtag in their event updates is intended to help make other fellow roleplayers notice that there is something happening at that time. By typing the same hashtag, the roleplayers construct the idea that some of them are attending the same event.

Textual productivity is when fans produce and circulate texts among themselves (*ibid.*, p.39). As the whole interaction in Twitter-based roleplaying is held in textual basis, we can conclude that all activities in Twitter's RPW are belong to textual productivity. These roleplayers produce this roleplaying activity but they do not make it to be mass-consumed by more 'normal' popular culture (non-fans), instead they circulate it within the roleplaying communities and related fandoms (such as Korean celebrity roleplayers would be more likely to circulate their texts within their fellow Korean celebrity roleplayers, but it is not impossible to also build a relation with Western celebrity roleplayers). Then what can we identify here if every single thing in RPW is considered as textual productivity? Here, what we can identify is the celebrity roleplayer's activities which is not included whether as semiotic or enunciative productivity. As the writer states before that the daily activity of celebrity roleplayers includes updating based on the real-life of their personas and providing fan service for fans, these celebrity roleplayers also has another activity that they frequently do—retweeting informations related with their persona's real-life and related with roleplaying life. By retweeting, indirectly they continue the circulation process of that information, spreading it to the wider audiences—and if information is retweeted by a much-followed roleplayer, it means that information is necessary, or at least recommended. This activity is not included in enunciative productivity since it is not appear as a conversation between accounts; the roleplayers just simply retweet (repost) the information. Textual productivity that occurs within a roleplaying agency would obviously be its rules which members of that agency are committed to. Since Twitter's information update are flowing on momentarily basis (seconds, minutes—not days; last day's updates would easily be gone if the number of updates at that time is in heavy-flow condition), agencies usually put their rules in their 'Favorite' tweet list, so people can always view it every time. The rules asserted the sense of ownership

upon the members, as if the agency is the 'host' and the members are the 'guest', so if members are about to do anything they must obey the rules that made by the 'host'. It is analogous to the concept of 'contract' in real-life celebrity industry, where artist from a certain agency must obey series of rules from their agency and cannot come and go as they wish because to be accepted in an agency they should pass the audition process and to come out from the agency they must finish their contract there. In the case of event organizer, textual productivity can also be found in the rules of booking an event, where the settlement of these rules construct the idea of holding an event in virtual textual world. Not just for exploring their fannish desire, the formation of this virtual event such as sophisticated wedding, promnight, or concert here also becoming the aid for those roleplayers who have no chance to attend such events in the real world—by experiencing the virtual version of those events, they can gain pleasure and satisfaction that became the solution for them to deal with their loss.

After identifying fans productivity that emerge in the RPW's institutions, the writer will interpret the data using the chosen theoretical background as been stated in chapter two of this thesis, which is Henry Jenkins' Textual Poachers. As de Certeau suggests that "poaching" is the ongoing relationship between readers and writers as the struggle for possession of the text and for control over its meanings (cite in Jenkins 1992, p. 24-25), it can be perceived that roleplaying is kind of poaching for its ongoing relationship between the roleplayers and the non-roleplayer fan (but particularly it is among the roleplayers, who made and also read/respond the text) as the struggle for possession of the 'roleplaying world and activity' and for control over its meanings (that this roleplaying activity is meant to be the means of fan service, but then it moved to be also as a means to experience celebrity life). The roleplayers pick aspects of certain celebrities which fascinates them, then they reproduce it (in the form of tweets as a roleplayer) and build new meaning from their text reproduction. Here the roleplayers conceptualize celebrity as a practice (Marwick and Boyd 2011, p.139), rather than a status acquired because of the position of a certain job. The tweets that these roleplayers produced mostly are the enactment of the real celebrity, only adapted to the local (Indonesian) language. They also frequently inserted aspects of their real-life experiences /identity as common people in their tweets, constructing pseudo identity for their celebrity roleplaying persona. Besides creating pseudo identity, their relation with fans and fellow celebrity also can be considered as a pseudo relation since the fans are consciously perceive their existence as pseudo celebrity, and the celebrity friends that they interact with are actually also not an actual celebrity in real-life.

4. Conclusion

The researcher has resulted in a conclusion on how the virtual miniature of Korean celebrity industry is constructed in Twitter's roleplaying world. It is known that fan productivity is not just happen in the name of fanaticism—the fans produced such grassroots culture also in order to cope with their inability to access things relating with their object of adoration and to provide mutual favor for their fellow fans who has the same condition as them. By doing so, they expect the fans communion will became more solid, therefore they can be less-marginalized like what the more normal (non-fans) society often put fans into such position.

The act of poaching the initial purpose of roleplaying (to provide fan service) by creating more multifarious activities in roleplaying world (not just simply fan talk) is the implementation of de Certeau's notion of poaching itself, which says that "poaching" is the ongoing relationship between readers and writers as the struggle for possession of the text and for control over its meanings (cite in Jenkins 1992, p. 24-25). The creation of various activity within roleplaying world is done in order to maintain the communal relationship between roleplayers and to stimulate further development in this fan production. By maintaining such relationship among roleplayers, these fans make an effort to assert the possessing status upon roleplaying world, and to indirectly state that they are the ones who holds the control over that realm. Finally, this thesis needs further studies since roleplaying practice in Indonesia is still very new, so the dissemination of the roleplaying community in Indonesia are still unruly (there are no certain directories).

5. References

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