This research investigates how Lord of the Rings fans play significant role in participatory culture. The writer identifies a range of active audience’s perceptions which are seen as fans’ experiences, perspectives and common concerns towards NZ in LotR movie trilogy by using qualitative method. The data are collected from 29 respondents gained from five LotR Facebook groups, who are willing to do in-depth interview to answer on how they define and perceive NZ in LotR movie trilogy before and after watching the trilogy. The writer argues that NZ has both shaped, and been re-shaped by fans ‘involvement’ in perceiving and defining NZ in present days after watching LotR movie trilogy. Two cycle of coding are applied in order to gain better interpretation from the 29 responses of qualitative data set. Fans prove that they have refine views after watching LotR movies trilogy; there is a transformation process. The writer hopes that participatory culture of LotR fans can open up new views for redesigning participating environments in new media age, and this study would be of much relevance to those interested in significance of participatory culture theories to contemporary media studies, and readers may learn and get better knowledge on the development of media and culture based on fans initiatives and participation in sustaining and maintaining its fans culture.

**Keywords**: audience research, fandom, lord of the rings movie trilogy, participatory culture, virtual communities

**Introduction**

Millions of people consume media and interact with each other to talk about the same interest through online media. There are no more boundaries and obstacles in accessing media and reaching out to other people. All becomes possible because of new media. Media enables people to be introduced to popular movies, discuss topics related to the movies, and even criticize certain properties of the movies. In other words, media consumption allows the citizens to participate in participatory culture. Rejection and reception towards some movie products are usually shown through media as well. Audiences who share common interests, develop networks, and create a common culture that eventually build community and their ‘new’ culture.

The popular movie trilogy that gets huge attentions from people around the globe is The Lord of the Rings [henceforth LotR] movie trilogy directed by Peter Jackson [henceforth PJ]. It is adapted from a novel with the same title authored by J. R. R. Tolkien. PJ is a New Zealand [henceforth NZ] nationality, chose NZ to be the filming location of the LotR movie trilogy because the landscape of his homeland is viewed similar to what he imagined as of reading the Tolkien’s works. LotR then has been made into three films from 2001-2003 with the complete trilogy out on DVD in 2004. All contribute to NZ’s scenic beauty; the vast and various terrains that NZ has, and what the LotR movie trilogy needs are in one whole country and in close proximity.

The construction of NZ through the portrayal of Middle-Earth [henceforth M-E] in the LotR movie trilogy contains PJ’s interpretation which uses NZ scenery as the background of the setting. PJ emphasizes: “The Lord of the Rings remains one of the greatest books ever written. “All I am offering is an interpretation, but hopefully one that will take the fantasy film to an entirely new level of adventurousness and believability” (qtd. in Beahm 64).
LotR movie trilogy audiences are assumed to be two types of audiences, one who is LotR novels reader and another one is a movie-goer who has not read the novels. Then, it turns out that from those two types of audiences, sparks a group of people who is emotionally and intellectually invested in the LotR trilogy (movie trilogy and/or novel trilogy) to create an online community-society-fandom, where they can share the same interests with other fans. Fans further create the communities in which they share viewing experiences or rework the texts. It is because of fans’ activities and interpretations that increase the credibility of the movie trilogy.

Regarding why the writer chose the topic to be studied because: 1) the settings used in the movie trilogy which took place in the whole country of NZ amazed many people in the world, and the phenomenon is hard to miss and really interesting to be studied; there are many landscapes, and scenery that awed the writer when watching the LotR trilogy, 2) LotR movie trilogy won many awards; 3) its settings embody a great deal of portrayal of NZ, which comes from a 'well done' representation by PJ, who portrayed the magnificent view and places of M-E represented in LotR trilogy; 4) the role of human's knowledge that helps them to represent the places and NZ's citizen putting them in a unique and better position in the world, and lastly 5) there is mass media interference that affects LotR’s fans in perceiving and defining NZ in LotR movie trilogy.

Related to these phenomena, this study is conducted in order to know how NZ displayed in the movie trilogy is defined and perceived by the LotR fans. The landscape could add up the value of the movie on the eyes of the audiences. The particular feeling of enjoying the scenery in a movie can enrich additional meaning whether audiences knew it is a real place or not and whether the fans will have new definition towards the place or not, which also makes the LotR trilogy, novels and movies, becoming long lasting and growing its popularity even more because of its fans contributions and participation.

To avoid widespread discussion and broader analysis, the writer limits the sample of respondents, which only consists of 29 respondents. The study requires analysis of Participatory Culture done by LotR fans as active audiences using Jenkins’ (1992, 2006, 2009) theory. All samples are derived from five LotR Facebook groups such as: The Tolkien Society; The Lord of the Rings - Fan Club; Tolkien is My Religion, Silmarillion is My Bible, Eru is My God; LotR Collectors; and The Tolkien Cosplayer.

The writer uses Henry Jenkins’ (2009) participatory culture theory, which he defines as a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to newbie. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another.

Fandom has been examined from a variety of disciplines such as communication, sociology, history, and psychology. Researchers from field of communication studies for example Nancy Baym (2000), Matt Hills (2002), Henry Jenkins (2006) typically conduct ethnographic analyses of fan essays and relate their content to sociological theories, while researchers in psychology such as Christian End (2002) and Bob Heere (2007) have examined fan responses on surveys and language use online to relate their content to past social psychological theories (e.g., social identity theory).

Interestingly, the focus of each area of research are also differed with communication and media researchers examining pop culture fandom (e.g., television, film, literature) or sociologists and psychologists primarily examining sport fans. There appears to be two separate disciplines of research for pop culture research and sport fans research split along disciplinary lines. Recently, Reysen and Branscombe (2010) have called for greater examination of all fan groups rather than restricting research to one fandom. In a series of studies they found greater similarities among fans of various interests (sport, media, hobby, music) than differences between them. They suggest that: “Fans are similar, regardless of type of interest. All fans, as members of groups, should experience similar underlying psychological mechanisms of identity formation, intra and intergroup processes regardless of type of fan interest” (Reysen and Branscombe 293).

However, the writer argues that, each group of fans of various interests is definitely different and unique for each case. For example Fans of LotR, at first the writer probably would agree with Reysen and
Branscombe proposed theory. So, while the LotR fans are in the same Facebook group, but LotR fans are actually divided into two factions: LotR fans of films and LotR fans of books [Tolkien’s fans], which is hard to tell explicitly because they join the same group of LotR fandom community.

Fans contributions will be valued by other fans for creative expression and active participation. Their participation becomes part of culture; human activities. Jenkins (2003) pinpoints that participatory culture emerges as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that enable average citizens to participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation, and [re]circulation of media content (286).

Furthermore, many people are part of participatory culture through their activities. Those activities such as: Affiliations-membership, formal and informal, in online communities centered on various forms of media e.g. Facebook; [Re]circulation-shaping the flow of media, such as being an admin of LotR Facebook group, podcasting or blogging. Problem solving-working together in terms-formal and informal-to complete tasks and develop new knowledge, e.g. through Wikipedia; Expressions-producing new creative forms, such as: fan videos, fan fiction, zines, costume player etc.

Fans usually embrace and attempt to integrate media representations into their own experience; and fans productivity is not limited to what they have seen and experienced with the products, but also participate in the construction of the original text and change it to become popular culture. Participatory culture aims to create (fan) communities that support more virtual interaction via online access to enhance its member understanding, in this case in perceiving and defining NZ in LotR movie trilogy.

Fans gather online as a method for creating a space wherein they can create, share, and consume their culture. As nowadays era has expanded access to the practices of cultural production and circulation, “fandom here becomes a participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community” (Jenkins, Textual 42). In addition, fans in media engage in a range of activities including interpreting, re-reading texts, collecting merchandise, and attending relevant events. The ability to imagine alternatives and build community, not coincidentally, is a basic for participatory culture. Jenkins also argues that “fans constitute a particularly active and vocal community of consumers whose activities direct attention onto this process of cultural appropriation” (28). Jenkins in Lewis (1992) also points that media fans are consumers who produce, readers who write, and spectators who participate.

Methodology

This study explores on how participatory culture done by LotR fans in virtual community, especially on fans in defining and perceiving NZ in LotR movie trilogy. In order to do that, this study is completed by applying qualitative data analysis, using Audience Research approach. The purpose of using Audience Research is to get surveys on active audiences’ value of “real world” context and the availability of mass data in developing information about human actions. The audiences’ responses later are coded by using Initial Coding and Focused Coding. The Initial Coding used Jenkins’ eight themes on Participatory Culture activities, after codes are generated then the Focused Coding is processed to categorize more specific themes under each first codes.

The data used to conduct this study are gained from: 1] in-depth interview, 2] audio-visual materials (LotR movie trilogy), and 3] documents (books, journals, news, online data and information). The population is taken from LotR fan members in five Facebook groups which are 39516 by April 16th, 2015 to ensure the representation of all major groups, and to avoid bias towards ideology each Facebook group presented. Then, the population is calculated by using Sample Size Calculator Survey System in http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm for the data set, gained 79 samples.

The writer conducts online survey (virtual ethnography) from April through May 2015, via posting in five Facebook groups: 1)The Tolkien Society; 2) The Tolkien Cosplayers; 3) Tolkien is My Religion, Silmarillion is My Bible, Eru is My God; 4) LotR Collectors; and 5)LotR Fan Club, where LotR’s fans can access the Google.form link easily for the questionnaire. When the respondents reach 79 participants, the writer collects those who were willing to participate for in-depth interview questions, 29 respondents
for qualitative samples are gained from the process. The qualitative sampling is used to find recurring themes related to participatory culture theory. The data analysis is done by applying Initial Coding, and Focused Coding (Saldana). In a nutshell, the qualitative data is collected simultaneously which later to be processed using two cycle of coding to make the analysis completely written and fully understood.

Discussion

For the first cycle of coding, the codes were created based on keywords from Participatory Culture theory proposed by Jenkins. There are eight themes, but the writer only discusses about TRANSFORMATION and APPROPRIATION themes, since those two are the most frequent codes appear when NZ is mentioned by the respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO</th>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>TRANSFORMATION</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>APPROPRIATION</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL FREQUENCY</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Frequency from first cycle of coding*

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<th>FREQUENCY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>PRAISING NZ</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>VISITING NZ</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>EQUALIZING M-E as NZ</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>INSPIRING</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL FREQUENCY</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2. Frequency from second cycle of coding*

**Transformation**

Respondent’s opinions under this code depict that LotR fans experience transformation - the change of knowledge, attitude and emotion towards the image of NZ, which undergo through a process: before watching the LotR movie trilogy and after watching the LotR movie trilogy. From not really knowing NZ to become more aware of the country, from do not care to become pay more attention and want to visit NZ. There is a change of judgment from the audience before and after watching LotR. Most of them give positive feedback under the code of TRANSFORMATION. In other words, they get more impressed and refine knowledge than before.

Before watching LotR movie trilogy, respondents get to know NZ from books, encyclopedia, documentaries, TV etc., which are known as co-text Linell (1998), Arvaja et al. (2007), and Arimbi (2015) or subtext. Audiences already have expectation and their first blue-prints on what NZ was like. As H.R Jauss states in *Towards an Aesthetics of Reception* (1982) about horizon of expectation which emerges to the reader when one reads a new text in the condition that one has earned past reading experience before reading the new text. It turns out that the text [LotR movie trilogy], makes the audience get better understanding about NZ. The movie trilogy surpassed respondents’ expectation. Audiences arrange meaning not only from one text but also other texts. Some people only know that NZ is a country in the southwestern Pacific Ocean that offers great variety and opportunities for adventure and nature experiences; it is land of Kiwis and butter. Some other thought NZ looked a lot like Britain in many places; a place where people spoke like Australians and have good business schools. Respondents have less information about NZ before watching LotR trilogy.

Most of respondents get curious about the setting of M-E that makes them even more want to visit or to move to NZ. LotR audiences get interested by the background setting of the LotR movie trilogy, the vast nature of NZ, the inhabitants [Maori], its film industry history and so forth. They praise NZ for its pristine natural beauty.
Furthermore, the theme of PRAISING NZ appeared mainly in responses to questions: What do you think of NZ after watching the LotR trilogy? How do you define NZ after watching the LotR trilogy? In response to these questions, there are 43 frequencies for PRAISING NZ out of 47 frequencies under TRANSFORMATION code from 23 respondents. NZ described by the respondents as an incredible beautiful country with wonderful nature, great mountains, varied landscape and scenery, and as a land of long white cloud.

In addition, besides describing about the place, the respondents also mentioned about NZ inhabitants who they describes as friendly, interesting, resourceful, extremely talented, enthusiastic, and genuine people. Further, respondents depict NZ as far more than just a movie setting but the landscapes are unparallel, pure, breathtaking, peaceful fantasy land, a paradise, a place for adventure and hiking, and a very interesting place to visit and to live.

At the intersection of fiction, fantasy and fact; a magical union of place and people capable of throwing them into an idea of a place that both never was and always is (Respondent 48).

Right after the trilogy I only thought of it as Middle Earth, but now after having learned so much about it, I see it as a gorgeous, fantastically inspiring island that is populated in modern cities with enthusiastic, genuine people who love their home and are protective of it (Respondent 62).

Those responses show how audiences depict NZ after watching the LotR trilogy. Respondent 62 only knew NZ was next to Australia, but that was the limitation of her knowledge before watching the LotR movie trilogy. Then her definition towards NZ transformed after watching the LotR movie trilogy, so did Respondent 48.

After the movie trilogy, more people from other countries were considering to move to NZ. Some fans do not necessarily oppose Computer Graphic technology, but solely only value the natural beauty of the country, and make it their reasons to move or to visit NZ. “That I definitely needed to go there and see all those beautiful landscapes by myself” (Respondent 69). Other states: “Really need to go! Already planning! Want to visit in July [2015]! Searching for options!” (Respondent 70).

Further, the second cycle of coding is coded as EQUALIZING M-E AS NZ. Respondents believe that NZ is more than a movie setting, it is M-E based on their perspective. “New Zealand = Middle-Earth, for sure!” (Respondent 6). Thus category can be done because audiences have their own blue-prints, and social background.

Overall, LotR movie trilogy has been the main attractions of NZ. It did not only show the scenery but also the craftsmanship (WETA Workshop) and general skills or abilities as a filmmaking nation, and has interesting film history. New Zealanders were able to prove that they have everything that any story could want. The decision to make LotR films in NZ impacted on how people imagine M-E. While many landscapes can be found worldwide, this country is the place that houses them all; bush land, forests, mountains, rivers and plains all in close proximity, which makes it a perfect match for epic filming projects. Like described by one of the respondents: “They could not have found a more perfect setting to embody Middle Earth” (Respondent 73).

The respondents construct the image of NZ by doing Intertextuality practice. It is a term first coined by Julia Kristeva. But which we shall use to cover this study is somewhat in different range of Kristeva’s definition on Intertextuality theory. According to Fiske (1989) in his book Moments of Television: Neither the Text Nor the Audience, every text has Intertextuality aspects which give information of the development of meanings about them, and the audiences have the main role in arranging and maintaining those meanings. He pinpoints that every text enables the readers to arrange meaning not only from itself but also other texts.

The process of Intertextuality is where the meaning-making is generated and it leads to the judgment for the LotR trilogy movie setting. They cross reference other sources (books, documentaries, films) to determine LotR movie trilogy position value. In TRANSFORMATION code, LotR fans have their main role in maintaining and arranging the meaning based on their own preferred standard pleasure and their
social background. LotR fans construct the meaning of NZ and their judgment of the country by seeing the trilogy based on their social background, knowledge, and experiences.

The LotR trilogy draws out the fans creative authenticity, exploring the concept of participatory culture and its importance to cultural studies and media studies. By linking LotR fans perception towards the film trilogy, forging connections between M-E and NZ. The writer argues that NZ has both shaped, and been re-shaped by fans ‘involvement’ in perceiving and defining NZ in present days after watching LotR movie trilogy, in a better way.

Appropriation

There are 20 frequencies for APPROPRIATION code. This code also has Intertextuality involved in the development of audience’s perception in making meaning towards NZ. Like what Jenkins has proposed about appropriation: A deliberate act of acquisition of something, often without the permission of the owner, incorporation by joining or uniting. A process by which audiences taking culture apart and putting it back together; depending on fans own social and cultural background.

Having our own cultural background, of course firstly, we have to have other text(s) as our standard(s). Respondent 71 for example, she has been joining LotR virtual community for more than five years, herein she has many other subtexts or co-texts as supplement to the LotR movie trilogy and/or NZ. She stated that she has good impression when exposed to NZ by its contrasts of landscapes. The movie, and behind the scenes, confirm her first good impression. In other words, the other texts like she stated has big contribution in her decision when saying that the movie confirmed her first good impression about NZ.

There are 15 frequencies under PRAISING NZ category. Although PRAISING NZ category under APPROPRIATION code is overlap with PRAISING NZ category under TRANSFORMATION code, it is quite distinctive in the way how respondents response to the questions. In taking culture apart and putting it back together based on fans social and cultural background, Respondent 75 applied Intertextuality practice by putting Bible as the main other text with LotR movie trilogy as the supplementary text. As we can see, he puts Bible solely as the main-text because it is in his greatest interests to see the image of Lord's [God-Jesus Christ] stories to come in image reality as much as possible, in this case in the LotR movie trilogy.

Respondents 56 and 73 for example, put the LotR book trilogy as the main text, while the film trilogy is the supplementary or enhancement text. “Tolkien's stories enhanced by Peter Jackson's spectacular films open a whole new world for me artistically” Respondent 56, and “they [LotR film trilogy] have added to the books tremendously by bringing the characters and settings to physical and visual life” Respondent 73. It is crystal clear that there are many LotR fans that are actually come from the books readers.

Respondents 17, 48, 49, 71 put NZ as the main text, because they said it is better suited than other places, or it is the best fit for the LotR movies to be set there. The audiences make confirmation by comparing other places which they have seen through other texts or their own experience and social background. Respondent 17 for instance, he mentioned UK at first that NZ looked a lot like Britain in many places. He could say so, since he has the background knowledge of living there. He compares UK with NZ which is he assumed that NZ has better mountains, more space to do the filming without modern items like trains, steel towers, and aircraft appearing in the camera’s view. He implicitly states that NZ which is good for LotR filming location is also less modernize than UK. Respondent 17 has his own horizon of expectation toward NZ, but his expectation is not high to describe NZ better than UK other than as the filming location.

In the other hand, there is a statement by a USA female citizen that “New Zealand is a dream destination of mine! It is a country with varied and spectacular geography. New Zealand seems committed to keeping the land pristine” (Respondent 54). In this case, her horizon of expectation is fulfilled by the visual information of NZ, which makes her wanting to visit NZ.
Respondent 75 even compare LotR filming location with other filming setting such as Xena the Warrior Princess and Adventure of Hercules which is filmed in NZ. Xena movie is called as the co-text or subtext, which means that audiences can look, or compare at other similar texts from the main text in order to develop its meanings and judge the main text, whether the main text is better or worse than the co-text, equal to co-text, or just as complementary source of information.

INSPIRING category appears under APPROPRIATION code. There are 7 frequencies. “Yes most definitely! Tolkien’s stories enhanced by Peter Jackson’s spectacular films open a whole new world for me artistically. It inspired me!” (Respondent 56). Inspiration emerges when there are other texts or previous audience’s experiences enlighten one’s mind. The past experience and new experience ‘collide’ to make and alter new meaning(s), which give new standard towards audience’s horizon of expectation. So, Intertextuality is inseparable with audiences’ experiences and expectations in order to make novel meaning on new text(s).

Conclusion

Fandom has both been reshaped by and helped to reshape culture in making an alternative community. Fandom has become a participatory culture in transforming audiences’ experience into producing new culture, which shows the transformation of audiences in effect of new media. On the other hand, audiences are making their presence felt by actively shaping media flows.

Two codes have been analyzed and discussed thoroughly, which reveal important issues as the central attitude of active audiences. Fans of LotR are ‘separated’ into two factions, Tolkien’s works fans or Jackson’s films fans. Basically they compare the novel towards the motion pictures, which is in cultural studies known as Intertextuality practice. Audiences look at other text which unconsciously builds standard and expectations in audiences’ mind; horizon of expectation. While on the other side, many LotR fans undergo transformation in seeing NZ after watching LotR movie trilogy, they also imply Intertextuality while describing NZ as a country in their ‘new way’ of definition.

Now, fans become more active. Fans strive to own the text. They are not purely textual poachers who ‘hunts’ illegally on the property of another. Existing media literacy materials give us issues of representation, helping us to think critically about how media frames perception of the world and reshapes experience according to its own codes and conventions. Yet these concepts need to be rethought for an era of participatory culture. The study of participatory culture is beneficial for cultural studies, media studies, and cinema/film studies that explore the relationship between cultural, and social of participatory media. The writer also concludes that the Codes presented above also amplify Jenkins’ theory of participatory culture in new media age.

Works Cited


