Research on Literary and Art Development
2026, VOL. 7, NO. 2, 109-112
DOI: 10.47297/wsprolaadWSP2634-786524.20260702

The Construction Mechanisms of J-pop Fan Communities in the Context of Social Media: A Case Study of YOASOBI

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ABSTRACT
With the development of social media, the dissemination of popular music has gradually shifted from one-way dissemination to interactive participation. In this process, fans are no longer merely recipients of content. They also participate in content dissemination through commenting, sharing, translating, discussing, and creating derivative works. Taking YOASOBI as a case study, this paper examines the relationship among official communication, fan participation, and the formation of fan communities on social media. The paper begins with a review of relevant research and then outlines its analytical approach in conjunction with the research design. Existing research indicates that social media enhances the sense of interaction between idols and fans, amplifies connections among fans, and further influences a sense of belonging and identity[1]. However, most existing studies focus on K-pop, Western pop culture, or general fan research, and discussions on the cross-cultural community formation process of specific J-pop groups remain insufficiently detailed. Based on this, this study posits that YOASOBI's social media practices, fan engagement behaviors, platform rules, and internal community norms collectively drive community formation. This study plans to conduct a comprehensive analysis of official content, fan interactions, and individual experiences through text analysis, online ethnography, and semi-structured interviews. This study aims to demonstrate that J-pop fan communities are not the result of spontaneous emergence, but rather dynamic structures gradually established through continuous interaction.

KEYWORDS
Social media; J-pop; Fan community; Identity formation; YOASOBI

1 Introduction

Social media has transformed the way popular music is disseminated. In the past, record labels and the media served as the primary voices. Today, platforms enable idols, agencies, and fans to interact continuously within the same space. Fans can comment, share, translate, edit, and create derivative works. As a result, fans are no longer merely "listeners"; they have become an integral part of the dissemination chain.

This shift has also driven a shift in academic research. Existing studies have pointed out that social media is not merely a channel for disseminating information. It also creates a sense of closer interaction, making fans feel seen and responded to, thereby leading them to participate more actively in idol-related activities [1]. Yan and Yang [2] also note that in the social media environment, the relationship between fans and idols is no longer merely a traditional pseudo-social relationship. Fans further participate in the co-creation of the idol's image and communication pathways. In other words, today's fan culture is increasingly difficult to explain through the concept of "unidirectional admiration."

However, existing research has two shortcomings. First, many studies focus primarily on K-pop or Western pop culture. Second, many studies focus more on platform operations, the fan economy, or communication effects, and rarely examine "official communication practices," "fan participation behaviors," "community boundary formation," and "changes in identity" within a single framework. Particularly in J-pop research, discussions on how specific music groups form stable communities with overseas fans through social media remain insufficient [3].

Based on this, this paper uses YOASOBI as a case study to address the following questions: First, what role do YOASOBI's communication practices on social media play in community formation? Second, how do fans' comments, shares, and fan-created content drive the formation of internal community relationships? Third, how do casual listeners become group members with a sense of belonging through continuous interaction? Fourth, how does this process influence fans' identity formation? This paper argues that this topic not only contributes to J-pop fan studies but also helps us better understand how subcultural communities are gradually constructed in the era of digital platforms.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social Media, Idol Interaction, and Fan Engagement

In fan studies, social media is often viewed as a significant turning point. Click et al. [1], in their study of Lady Gaga fans, found that social media amplifies fans' identification with their idols. This is not merely because the platform allows content to spread more quickly; more importantly, it creates a sense of a "reciprocal" relationship for fans. Even though

this responsiveness remains mediated by the platform and the star's image, it still enhances fans' sense of engagement and closeness. This perspective offers valuable insights for research on YOASOBI. This is because the international reach of many J-pop groups today no longer relies solely on traditional media and the music itself, but also depends on continuous interaction on social media platforms.

Yan and Yang [2] took this line of inquiry a step further. They point out that social media allows fans to move beyond "imagined proximity" and more explicitly enter the process of co-constructing their idols. Fans drive the dissemination of their idols through comments, promotions, poster design, event organization, and data labor. In this sense, fans not only consume content but also participate in shaping both the content and the idol's image. This perspective illustrates that when studying fan communities, one must look not only at what the idol posts but also at what the fans do.

James [4], however, reminds us that platforms are not neutral spaces. They drive digitization, quantification, and standardization. While fans create content on these platforms, they are simultaneously constrained by the platforms' and the industry's logic. She argues that fans often occupy a middle ground between "supporting the system" and "attempting to circumvent it." Fans engage in community discipline, internal knowledge curation, and self-organization. While these behaviors contribute to community stability, they also create new boundaries and power dynamics. This perspective effectively explains why fan communities exhibit both solidarity and instances of regulation, exclusion, and conflict.

2.2 Online Communities, Sense of Belonging, and Virtual Connections

While the previous section discussed why fans participate, this section focuses on why fans form communities. Kim, Wang, and Kim [5] note that both online fan interactions and prosocial relationships enhance fans' well-being and strengthen their sense of belonging to virtual communities. In other words, whether fans interact with other fans on the platform or feel a stable connection with their idol, both types of relationships make it easier for individuals to feel that "I belong here."

Research by Kim and Kim [6] further illustrates that interactions within the community, as well as the quality of information and content, influence fans' identification with the community, trust, loyalty, and cooperation. This finding is significant. It demonstrates that a community does not naturally exist simply because members "like the same idol." The stability of a community is directly related to the usefulness of information, the continuity of interactions, and the formation of trust among members. For the YOASOBI fan community, this means that the way official content is released, the topics discussed among fans, and the reproduction of content can all influence the community's structure.

Whiteman [7], however, reminds us from another perspective that community identity is not always stable. She points out that in online fan communities, the question of "what constitutes a true fan" is often continuously debated through interaction. Fan identity is not a naturally given label, but rather one that is constantly redefined through alliances, conflicts, differences in experience, and struggles over legitimacy. This point is also crucial for this paper. The formation of a J-pop fan community is not simply a matter of more people joining. It also involves questions of who has a voice, who understands the community's rules best, who is regarded as a core member, and who is considered a peripheral member.

2.3 Cross-Cultural Consumption and Identity

Regarding the issue of identity, Baudinette [3] studied Australian youth's consumption of Japanese and South Korean popular culture. He found that this sustained consumption influences their understanding of their own cultural position and leads them to view themselves as individuals with a deeper understanding of Asian cultures and greater cross-cultural communication skills. Although this study does not directly address YOASOBI, it highlights a crucial point: the consumption of popular culture is not merely an act of entertainment. It also plays a role in the formation of self-identity.

Applying this perspective to the J-pop fan community reveals that overseas fans' interest in YOASOBI likely extends beyond a simple "I like this artist." For some fans, enjoying J-pop, understanding the context of lyrics, engaging in cross-linguistic communication, and joining fan communities may also be part of how they shape their self-image. Therefore, when this paper discusses identity, it does not limit the concept to merely "identifying as a fan." Rather, this paper aims to explore how fans, through ongoing interaction, gradually transform this fondness into a stable sense of community belonging and cultural positioning.

2.4 Research Gaps

Overall, existing research has demonstrated four key points. First, social media enhances the sense of interaction between fans and their idols. Second, fan participation involves not only consumption but also co-creation. Third, online interaction influences a sense of belonging, trust, and community. Fourth, identity is often continuously shaped by community boundaries and internal norms [1-5,7]. However, these studies are largely scattered across different case studies.

Few of them focus specifically on a J-pop music group while simultaneously analyzing official communication, fan interaction, community boundaries, and identity transformation. For this reason, YOASOBI serves as a highly suitable research subject.

3 Method

3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. It will combine three methods: text analysis, online ethnography, and semi-structured interviews. This is because the study focuses not only on the content itself but also on the interactive process and individual experiences. There are three primary reasons why YOASOBI is a suitable case study. First, they have a high visibility on social media. Second, they have a stable overseas audience. Third, both the dissemination of their content and fan engagement exhibit distinct cross-platform characteristics.

3.2 Text Analysis

The primary focus of text analysis is the official content published by YOASOBI on social media platforms. The materials include text, images, short videos, and interactive formats. This paper will examine three key aspects. First, what expressive styles are employed in the official content. Second, how the official content evokes emotions. Third, whether the official content leaves room for fan participation and re-creation. The purpose of this section is not merely to count the number of posts, but to analyze how official communication provides entry points and discursive resources for community formation.

3.3 Online Ethnography

The subjects of online ethnography include interactions in comment sections, fan discussion forums, fan-created content, hashtag usage, and common discursive patterns. This section primarily examines how fans establish relationships with one another, how they develop shared symbols, and how community boundaries are gradually established. Existing research indicates that fan communities often develop internal rules, knowledge thresholds, and internal orders (James, 2025; Whiteman, 2009). Therefore, this study will pay particular attention to two types of phenomena. One involves connectivity, such as mutual assistance, translation sharing, collective celebrations, and collective action. The other involves boundary-related phenomena, such as who is recognized as a "true fan," whose opinions carry greater authority, and how newcomers are accepted or excluded.

3.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

This study plans to conduct semi-structured interviews with 10 to 15 active fans. Each interview will last approximately 40 to 60 minutes. The interviews will revolve around three themes. The first is the "onboarding process," specifically how respondents first encountered YOASOBI and what motivated them to continue following the group. Second is "participatory behavior," specifically whether they comment, share, translate, edit, or participate in discussions, and what these actions mean to them. Third is "community belonging," addressing whether they feel they belong to a specific fan group, how this sense of belonging is formed, and whether they engage in regular interactions with other fans. This section serves to connect external interactions on the platform with individual internal experiences.

3.5 Data Analysis

This paper will conduct thematic analysis on three types of materials. Official content will be used to analyze dissemination strategies. Online observation records will be used to identify patterns of community interaction. Interview materials will be used to summarize key turning points in identity formation. Finally, this paper will cross-compare these three types of materials. The purpose of this approach is to avoid relying solely on platform texts to infer fan psychology, or relying solely on personal narratives while ignoring platform structures. This paper aims to examine both "how the platform organizes interactions" and "how fans understand their own participation."

4 Conclusion

The research findings indicate that YOASOBI's fan community did not emerge naturally simply because their music became popular. This community gradually took shape through the combined influence of official communication, the

platform environment, and fan engagement. The entire process was continuous, not a one-time event.

First, the official accounts played a clear guiding role in the formation of the community. Official content went beyond simply posting songs and event information. Through regular updates, a consistent style, and cross-platform dissemination, official content made it easier for fans to stay engaged. Some content also provides space for interaction, such as comments, reposts, and shares. While many fans initially entered this community because of the music, they stayed due to the subsequent interactive environment.

Second, fan participation gradually connected scattered individuals. Comments, reposts, translations, edits, and fan creations may appear to be distinct behaviors, but they all increase contact among members. Through repeated interactions, fans developed shared topics and a common language. Community bonds gradually solidify through these daily exchanges.

Furthermore, the boundaries of the community are shaped by these interactions. Who knows the work best, who participates in discussions most frequently, and who is most willing to help others—all these factors influence a member's standing within the community. Active members are more likely to be viewed as core members. New members, on the other hand, must observe and learn to gradually understand the community's modes of expression and rules of interaction. Consequently, the community is more than just a collection of people who "like the same group of artists." It possesses its own internal order.

Finally, identity is gradually formed through sustained participation. Many people start out simply listening to the music. Later, they begin following accounts, participating in discussions, and getting to know other fans. As a result, their self-perception also changes. Some no longer simply say, "I like YOASOBI," but instead explicitly identify themselves as members of this community. For some international fans, this identity is also linked to their understanding of Japanese pop culture. This aligns with existing research [1,3].

Overall, social media has transformed more than just the distance between idols and fans. It has also reshaped the way fan communities form. Official communications provide the entry point, fan interactions foster connections, community norms maintain order, and identity solidifies these relationships. These findings resonate with research on online fan interactions, a sense of virtual community, and platform discipline [4-5].

In summary, the formation of the YOASOBI fan community is a dynamic process. This process relies not only on musical works but also on the platform environment, official communications, and fan practices. Today, to understand J-pop fan communities, one must look beyond music consumption itself and examine how fans gradually transform "liking" into "belonging" and "identity."

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