

Our fragile star: Virtual identity and the maintenance of stardom in an online fan forum

Lusvita Nuzuliyanti
Lina Puryanti
English Department, Airlangga University
Surabaya Indonesia

Abstract

The Internet is a medium for social activities and is effective in building social ties, collective voice and a sense of community. The internet is bound to change and give different dimensions to existing conventional institutions, including changes in perception of 'identity'.

Against the backdrop of the *Korean Wave* (the increase in exports of South Korean cultural products since the late 1990s), this study aims to look at issues of virtual identity and at the maintenance of stardom in an online fan forum for Korean celebrities. The data is taken from a thread dedicated to Ju Ji Hun, a new actor in www.soompi.com, the biggest international forum for K-pop culture fans. Activities in the thread show high levels of involvement and attachment to the star and is thus a potential site for showing the process of the construction of virtual identity in the way fans interact with each other.

The seven-month study was done by observing thread activities and analyzing the content of the interactions. The result shows that the process of identification emerges through the building of a virtual family that works together to defend the star's celebrity status.

Introduction

The increasingly global entertainment industry promoted by the extensive use of the Internet is expanding the breadth and scope of intercultural fan activity. This makes computer-mediated fan culture a fertile site for learning about the development and dynamics of the multicultural identity – an issue that is becoming more important in an era when the movement and exchange of goods, services, ideas and practices happens across borders of cultures at a previously unimaginable speed.

The ability of the Internet to break time and space barriers in communication, combined with the flexibility and anonymity of internet interactions, offers new ways of constructing and maintaining interpersonal relationships and provides new pathways for exploring issues of identity among its multicultural users (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). The Internet can also stimulate freer modes of expression and create new discourses – which are usually creative and innovative (Crystal, 2001).

Fandom is always related to the formation of a common identity that is achieved through the process of idolatry. According to Darling-Wolf (2004), multicultural fans in particular tend to focus on finding a common identity which can diffuse their cultural differences. The process of finding a common identity can be achieved through the shared production of new cultural products/texts related to the object of interest. This is not the only way however, because fans can also create bonds through the affective connections that

exist from the feelings of identification with the star (Baldwin, Longhurst, McCracken, Ogborn, & Smith, 2004).

By focusing on an online fan forum for a new Korean male celebrity, this study explores the construction of virtual identity through members' involvement with each other and with the star. We find this issue an important one to study in response to the increasing influence of *Hallyu* or Korean Wave – the term for the influx of South Korean cultural products to countries like Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia, beginning in the late 1990s. *Hallyu* gained true momentum with the airing of TV drama *Winter Sonata* in NHK Japan where it gained a 20 percent rating. *Winter Sonata* was quickly followed by a series of other successful titles like *Full House* (2004), *Dae Jang Geum* (2005) and *Gung* (2006). The popularity of Korean cultural products overseas has various effects – from warming the chilly relationship between Japan and Korea (Maliangkay, 2006) to the increase in status for all Korean-related products and lifestyle in the countries that were the main target markets of *Hallyu* (Norimitsu, 2006).

Online fan culture

The enthusiastic practices of fans are conventionally seen negatively by many. Fans are usually people seen as the dupes of popular culture (Barbas, 2001). Nevertheless, recent studies on fan culture inclined to see fans as 'active audience' – people who actively produce meaning and derive pleasure from it (Storey, 2001).

As far as identity is concerned, the most prominent element of fan culture is the forming of a shared identity. Fans engagement with the stars they idolize may have different forms of expressions. Baldwin et al. (2004) stated that engagement takes the form of shared production of new cultural forms that are derived from the main object of affection – like MVs, fan fiction and other types of fan art – as well as the pleasure and identification fans find from their idols and from each other. Nevertheless, both processes involve the notion of how fans derive a sense of identity and affection for the stars, forming a special bond among themselves in the process. We see that fans' consumption of a star's discourse – like a star's fan magazines, tabloid and TV appearances – while pivotal in constructing and asserting a star's celebrity status (Marshall, 1997) is also one important factor in defining the construction of shared identity among fans from various backgrounds.

The increasingly global entertainment industry has propelled a wider use of the Internet for reaching out to the global market. Studies found that the Internet is able to preserve the cultural identity of a particular cultural group in an increasingly global world (Kerr, 2000; Wu, 1999) and, at the same time, it is also said to be able to build a sense of identity for users from culturally, linguistically and socio-economically different backgrounds (Cassel and Tversky, 2005). In the first view, the Internet is used as a tool to enhance the locality and the specific-cultural background of the users to achieve a sense of commonality while on the second one, commonality is achieved through how users build a community of their own, setting their own goals, making their own rules and speaking with one voice.

Whatever the Internet means to its vastly numbered and hugely diverse users, underlies the fact that the internet is a potent site for exploring further questions about the mechanism of collective identity constructed within its virtual walls. Polletta and Jasper (2001) suggested that the sense of identity comes from the connection between users' cognitive, moral and emotional background with the broader community practice and institutions.

Communicative processes that happen within a virtual interaction are the vehicle for conveying collective identity to its users. What can happen in this process of identity transmission is the process of declaring or rejecting the collective identity, accepting it or modifying it (Snow, 2001). In this process, the collective identity takes its shape and gets its name in a process of negotiation between users. In the end, a sense of collective identity can be successfully built if individual users are willing to abandon their self-interest for the sake of the virtual network that they form (Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2004; in Shumate & Pike, 2006).

The growing use of the Internet by multicultural fans, separated from each other and from their star not only by enormous physical distance but also by cultural divides, enhances the development of common identity through community building and network maintenance. In this context, the Internet is able to foster the affective dimensions in the relationship between fans and their stars – the dimensions that are very much responsible for the construction of fan identity.

Ju Ji Hun and the Korean Wave

Ju Ji Hun is a 25-year-old South Korean male celebrity propelled into instant stardom after his debut role as crown prince Lee Shin in the 2006 MBC hit *Gung/Princess Hours*. His role as an aloof and arrogant prince in an imaginary present-day Korean monarchy won him legions of fans, mostly female, so that his name became one of the two most-searched names in Yahoo! Korea that year. After the series, Ji Hun – formerly a fashion model – had an acting hiatus of many months, concentrating instead on making commercials and appearing in fashion shows.

His next TV drama *The Devil* was aired in March 2007 but high expectations for the series were not fulfilled despite the endorsement of other big names in South-Korean-entertainment circles. The series only received a dismal 10-percent-viewership rating although it was critically acclaimed. He was next linked to some other projects like a high-profile-period-TV drama and some movies, but in the end they never eventuated. In September 2007 Ji Hun's management company opened his official fan website but it was open only for fans from South Korea and Japan – much to the dismay of his international fans. Around the beginning of and in mid 2008 he finished filming two movies but both have not yet been released.

Ji Hun's background as a fashion model, with a short filmography and rare public exposure is not what a new idol is expected to bank on. Although his star image is modeled after the general traits that are commonly associated with South Korean celebrities and talents – a concoction of well-groomed good looks devoid of profanity and sex (Maliangkay, 2006) – Ji Hun's thin resume arguably puts him in a somewhat precarious position in an industry that tends to turn over its stars rather quickly. Idols and their talent agents must fight hard to find a place in the industry and the competition is indeed stiff – as shown by some cases of celebrity suicides. It is quite a common phenomenon similar to that in the Japanese entertainment industry – where men and women are prepared for idol status by powerful talent agents, but have a short shelf life (Darling-Wolf, 2003).

The star threads in the *soompi* forum

Some characteristics of the *soompi* forum, where the observations are done, illustrates the role online forums have in forming and enhancing the bonds between fans. As the biggest English fan website dedicated to Korean pop culture, soompi.com has almost 250,000 members with an average of 25,000 users logging on to the website every day. It is differentiated into several sub forums dedicated to various

aspects of K-pop culture, from lifestyle to fan arts. The sub forum that receives the biggest number of replies is sub forum K-drama and movies.

Under the sub forums, fans can create their favorite star threads. Thread dynamics are indicative of a star's popularity. The first indication of a star's popularity is the number of replies his/her thread receives. In this context, as of October 2008, Ji Hun's thread is in the second place with more than 35,000 replies. The thread which receives most viewings so far is the Asian pop sensation Bi/Rain's thread with around 42,000 replies.

However, this is not the only indication of the popularity of a star. When a reply is made, a thread is moved to the first position on the first page. If a thread is always on the first page, it means that fans are making active contributions to the thread and this is an indication of the current popularity of a star. A lack of current projects – which means lack of media exposure – contribute to these ups and downs in the level of popularity. It does not mean that a star is no longer popular; it can mean that currently he/she is probably not the hottest item on the market.

The opportunity to build a more private community with personalized common goals (Cassel and Tversky, 2005) is provided by the star threads. As a forum, activities in the thread do not happen in real time and members can post and read messages as they like (Crystal, 2001) which lessens the competition for the floor and gives members more or less equal ground for interaction. This means that heated debates between forum members are less likely to happen (D. Biedly, Harrington, & W. Biedly, 1999). The relative lack of aggression and tension in an online forum creates a welcoming environment and helps build the community which is needed to foster a sense of identity among fans.

The other thing that may have a big impact in setting common goals for forum members is that star threads – with the number of replies publically displayed – are like a microcosm of the real world where stars battle for popularity. In *soompi* fans can really 'root' for their stars, making all sorts of contributions and doing activities that enhance their stars' celebrity status, thus doing their share as a fan.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is basically ethnographic in nature with observation and informal non-structured interviews as the main tools for data collection. The observation was done for seven months from March to September 2007. When we started the observation,, we had already watched Ji Hun's debut drama *Princess Hours*. We also watched Ji Hun's second one – *The Devil* – when it was eventually released on DVD.

We had to become *soompi* members in order to have access to the forum. For the first two months, we did a non-participatory observation of the thread. However, the regular members of the thread seemed to notice that our nicknames ('bitterlemon' and 'beatifica') regularly visited the thread and so frequently 'invited' us to join the discussion. We decided to let one of us ('bitterlemon') join the discussion while 'beatifica' stayed as a lurker. We thought that by joining the discussion we would be able to feel the real dynamics of the thread and informally interview the members in order to get an insider's point of view of what is going on in the thread. 'beatifica' stayed as a lurker to keep our critical distance and to provide an outsider's perspective of the interactions. 'Bitterlemon' participated fully in the discussions, going through the 'hierarchical virtual ladder' from a newbie to a regular. 'Bitterlemon' was successful in forming a good rapport with other members of the thread and became a regular.

In September, nearing the time for the presentation of this paper in Auckland, we revealed to other forum members who we were, thus ending our observation. We received a lot of positive and encouraging reactions. Even now 'bitterlemon' still visits the thread regularly out of the friendship that grew during the observation.

The construction of virtual identity in Ju Ji Hun's thread

The sense of virtual identity in the Ju Ji Hun's thread is basically achieved through two channels that are related to each other: the notion of a 'Hunified' big family; and the common goal of defending Ji Hun's stardom. It seems that the nature and characteristics of the star threads really play a big role creating the two aspects. The notion of a Hunified big family marks the orientation to community building while the common goal of defending Ji Hun's stardom comes about because of the somewhat competitive nature of the star threads.

Community building in Ju Ji Hun's thread: The Hunified big family

The numbers of members who frequent Ji Hun's thread vary from time to time, depending on his projects and media exposure. The word 'frequent' here does not indicate the level of involvement of members. There are two types of involvement in the thread – the first one is those who are called 'lurkers' by the regulars. They are members who visit the thread regularly but rarely or never post or contribute anything to the thread. The second type, whose number is smaller than the lurkers, is the 'regulars' – members who dominate the discussion and frequently give and share Ji-Hun-related comments and materials. While the lurkers' cultural or country background is not clear, regulars made it known throughout the interaction that they mostly come from the Philippines and Singapore.

Lurkers in Ju Ji Hun's thread can sometimes become regular. This happens when they start to make contributions to the discussion and share Ji-Hun-related materials (like pictures or fan-made MVs). On the other hand, there are also cases where regulars become lurkers. However, there are at least two very active regulars whose presence is always felt in the thread: Rebbly, from Singapore – the source of Ji Hun related materials and the (unofficial) webmistress of Ji Hun's thread; and Ubbie, from the Philippines. They provide continuing emotional nurturing to the other members of the thread by giving attention to the newbies and creating emotional discussion about Ji Hun. These kinds of contributions are important as the building blocks of community building and the construction of identity in the thread.

The first indication of the family-like structure in the thread is the address system used by members of the thread – '*oppa*', '*unnie*' and '*sis/sister/sistah*.' '*Oppa*' and '*Unnie*' are Korean words for big/elder brother and sister respectively. '*Oppa*' is also used as an affective address system in an intimate male-female relationship like in a love relationship, even if the male is younger than the female. However, there is no fixed regulation for the use of the word '*oppa*' in the thread. While Ji Hun is the *oppa* of the thread, there are '*unnies*', too. '*Unnie*' is a mark of seniority in terms of familiarity and knowledge about the '*oppa*.' The *unnies* are also the source of authority and rules for newbies to be initiated into the 'family.'

This shows that members recognize the importance of bonding between fans to maintain Ji Hun's stardom. Bonding will create loyalty – which is an important element in sustaining popularity. Regulars especially – the '*unnies*' frequently call out to the lurkers to join the discussion and point out the importance of forming the '*unbreakable bond*' to support Ji Hun:

Hunnies love our beloved Hun, and *Hunnies love hunnies* too.

Hunnies should *stick together* in this thread because, ju ji hun deserves all the support that he gets from each one of us.

The use of these address systems and their implied effect on the thread structure also shows the existence of a virtual-hierarchical structure that exists between lurkers (the lowest rank), newbies (first time posters) to regulars (the more experienced members) of which all members are aware.

I only remember Ubbie saying something about Willow and me becoming the Batman and Robin of the thread – that I've become a regular – wow, have I really? I'm so sorry that I don't really have anything to share with you though, except for my two cents (not too good with techie things as you know – I don't even know how to make BOLD or colored letters 😊).

The second most important issue for evoking a sense of identity through this family-like structure, is the image constructed by members that the forum is like a home or a 'safe haven' where they belong. Postings made by members mostly spoke of the forum as a special place that they enjoy visiting. One of the postings, for example, reflected on the importance of the site to fans at a time when Ji Hun was receiving a lot of negative media attention:

PD choose JJH because of the same reason as PD Hwang

JJH is able to show the stark contrast character & feelings of the role for both Goong & Mawang.

I hope this shut those people who were critical of his initial casting.

In addition, comments such as: 'It's so wonderful to be back here'; 'Was away for about two weeks and had missed this site terribly'; or 'Long time, no see'; at the start of new entries, likened the site to a physical space. Similarly, fans who had been silent observers would occasionally feel the need to make their presence known.

As a home and safe haven, the site also provides the feeling that members can share their problems and dreariness of daily life after or at a hard day's work with other members – 'the sisters.'

One posting says,

good morning hunnies!!!!!!!

me at work now... stupid boss kicked a big fuss cos he didn't know how to connect the PC to the projector in time for the meeting and blaming me for that, too much rite???????? that's why I'm seeking refuge here to get back some warmth, or else I can certainly kill him with my high heels!!! (I've become the cold-blooded serial killer too, just like oppa, hahah!!!)

Setting up common goals – defending the stardom

There seems to be awareness among members of Ji Hun's position in the Korean entertainment circle and harsh star system. *Soompi's* competitive star thread also enhances that dimension. Although Ji Hun's thread is in second place for replies received, the thread is increasingly rarely found on the first page, which actually is quite natural given the small number of projects he is working on. From this awareness comes the notion of Ji Hun as a struggling common brother to everyone. When members experience

disappointment over Ji Hun's career choices – as in the case of discrimination in membership through Ji Hun's official site pulling out of a high profile project, or his long yet unexplained hiatus – they collectively try to justify and explain those moves in any way possible. Expression of disappointment is articulated subtly within this framework:

it shouldn't come as a surprise anymore if jjh decides not to go, maybe because he had just attended his own fan meet last march and yeoubek might want to slow down a bit for fear of over exposure in the japanese market. and besides it is going to be a smorgasboard with the hallyu stars trooping all at the same time. but of course we would have loved to see him once more, in such a big event. but maybe, just maybe... he might have a project by then, that will be keeping him busy.

This member's entry occurred at a time when Ji Hun was rumored to have been invited to an event in Japan at which big (invited) Hallyu stars attend – thus an invitation is like an acknowledgement of a star's popularity. In the end, Ji Hun did not attend the event. This member's entry shows disappointment that Ji Hun did not attend but still gives justification to his decision. However, the entry also shows worry about Ji Hun's position in the entertainment circle and laments the small number of works and projects in which he is involved 'but of course we would have loved to see him once more, in such a big event. but maybe, just maybe... he might have a project by then, that will be keeping him busy.'

In this sense, Ji Hun's perceived-fragile stardom is seen as the result of the vicious entertainment industry. Ji Hun is described as having a lot of enemies and rivals who envy his looks, charm, intelligence and unique career moves.

hunnies!!!! i was browsing through popseoul's blog and i was rather surprise to come across quite a number of oppa's antis.



those things they said were harsh and i felt so useless for not being able to defend oppa..



that stupid anti was so mean.. she really ruined my day.. sigh. had to log myself in here to revive and to literally BREATHE.. or get my senses back.. to believe that many ppl still loves oppa...it felt so lonely over there okay.. like i was the only one fighting for oppa.. fuuh!!! this place is my sanctuary. thank goodness.



those antis SUCKS!!!!!! Grrrrrr

In time of sadness (when JJH is being bashed by antis) we console, stand united to defend JJH, makes the hurting get better.

Conclusion

The global entertainment industry nowadays makes extensive use of the Internet to reach their market. This results in a more closely knitted multi-cultural-fan culture. This study aims at looking at how the use of the Internet, in this case in an online-fan forum, influences the construction of virtual identity in the forum. By looking at a forum for a Korean male celebrity – Ju Ji Hun – the study finds that members create a sense of common bond by establishing a virtual family that works together to defend Ji Hun's stardom. This

finding is in accordance with the nature of fan culture, which however, is given more edge as members create identity through strong orientation to the virtuality of the surrounding.

Lusvita F. Nuzuliyanti is a lecturer in English Department (Linguistics major) Airlangga University Surabaya Indonesia. She teaches Teaching: discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and semantics.

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