Chapter 6

The Affective Economy and Online Fan Communities: A Case Study of Johnny & Associates

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores participation and co-production in affective media experiences in Johnny & Associates’ online fan communities. Johnny & Associates is a Japanese all-male talent management company established in the 1960s. As a pioneer in the idol industry, Johnny & Associates and artists under its management have been highly influential in the contemporary Japanese entertainment industry. These artists are collectively known as Johnny’s idols or Janīzu. Much of the data are collected through participant-experiencer and interviews. The originality of this case study stems mainly from the empirical data for Johnny & Associates, Janīzu, and the global fan base during Johnny & Associates’ transition to a social media platform. This chapter analyses marketing strategy, audience awareness, and behaviour in relation to a mass media phenomenon. The complex interaction among Johnny & Associates, Janīzu, and fans generates tensions and contradictions that mirror the modern mediated life.

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INTRODUCTION

Japan is the second largest music market in the world, and its music is completely produced by local artists (IFPI, 2014). One branch of Japan’s contemporary music scene is the idol industry. Johnny’s idols, or Janīzu, is the term for artists represented by a Japanese all-male talent management company, Johnny & Associates. The term Janīzu, or Johnny’s idols, is preferred to the term celebrity. Also, the term idol fits this popular subculture. Since different definitions of idol appear in the literature, this paper uses Hiroshi Aoyagi’s (2005) concept of idols as “all-round popular talents” who sing, dance, act in dramas, and appear in commercials. While idols’ performance is often ridiculed as artless or “bubble-gum,” their popularity is an unmistakable phenomenon in Japanese society. The word idols is mostly relevant to young performers who sing, pose for photographs, and appear frequently in the Japanese media. However, the phenomenal popularity of Janīzu did not come overnight. The idols had to hone their skills in dancing, singing, and acting to please the audience. As the performers are trained to be observant of audience responses, they can handle unexpected situations by utilizing their resources. Also, during the global music crisis, Janīzu enjoyed unprecedented popularity and achieved impressive CD sales targets in the Japanese market.

More research that delve into aspect of consumer behavior and psychology in the digital economy is deemed necessary (Ling Chang, Ling Tam, & Suki, 2016; Nathan, Fook Chiun, & Suki, 2016; Suki, 2016). By way of a case study, this study focuses on commodification of Janīzu and how female fans experience the highly constructed personas of Janīzu. A range of specific affective dimensions in Johnny's fandom such as maternal feelings, shōnen, relatability, uncool-ness, and sexuality will be discussed. This chapter aims to advance the understanding of the interrelationships between the roles of affective components in marketing and how marketers use the affective component in their strategic marketing decisions.

The discussion draws upon ethnographic research conducted between November 2013 and March 2014 and 11 in-depth interviews with members of Johnny’s English-speaking online fan communities on LiveJournal.

BACKGROUND

The affective economy refers to an understanding of the emotional relationship that the consumer has toward exposure to a product and purchase decision (Jenkins, 2006). Affect involves stimulation, drives, motivations, emotions, feelings, sensations, or that which is experienced in a lived and embodied place and time (McStay, 2013). In short, it is corporeal. Affect is an umbrella term for a set of more specific mental processes, including emotions, moods, and possibly attitudes. Thus, affect might be considered a general category for mental feeling processes, rather than a particular psychological process per se (Bagozzi et al., 1999). In the context of this case study, affect also refers to emotional experience, the feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion, and even the sense of connectedness or community (Hardt, 1999, p. 96). Rather than defining affect philosophically, this case study defines the term from a marketing perspective.

Scholars who study marketing have viewed the affective economy as the desire to link brand meaning to symbolic consumption. This means that advertising involves a delicate balance between consumer passion and rationality expressed in terms of a movement among visual play, emotion, passion, nonsense,