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# EXPLORING CYBER FANDOM ON WESTLIFE'S COMEBACK TWENTY TOUR

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**Abstract.** *Fandom had found anywhere in the world. What makes this research is different from others that the 1990s boy band Westlife has proved that even after 20 years of career and decided to comeback in 2019, their fans has still been excited on watching their shows. Due to that reason, the researcher is interested in digging more about how fandom and cyber fandom work through Westlife's twenty tour 2019 as well as about the fandom context of Westlifers. In general, this research will use qualitative descriptive method by using purposive sampling technique. The result shows that the role of fandom and cyber fandom 'Westlife Indonesia' is quite important towards all Westlifers because this fan base provided everything they need to get closer to their idols and other fans. Also, there are four basic fandom contexts appeared in Westlifers: (1) virtual communication, (2) creativity, (3) knowledge or information, and (4) civil strength or organization.*

**Keywords:** *Fan culture, fandom, cyber fandom, Westlife, fandom context.*

## INTRODUCTION

Jenkins in Textual Poachers defined fans as active customer from media products which construct their own culture and subculture from all those popular cultures (Meyer and Tucker, 2007: 103). Sullivan (2013) stated that fans will stick to their favorite media emotionally through thinking about plot, character, and messages from the related text media deeply. Moreover, they will also get connected with the other fans in order to discuss about their similar affection object as well as to build interpretive community around certain media program. In short, fans are those who can read the text in the exact way while being able to re-deliver it with different style of perspectives (Jenkins, 2013).

This research will see fandom as a kind of vessel which functioned to make sure that every fan will get what they want related to their idol. And this research will focus on discussing fandom through Westlife loyal fans since the very beginning until today. Indonesia has become one of many countries which always had special meaning on Westlife career. In fact, Indonesia has the biggest population of Westlife fans since 1999 until today, which makes those fans to be categorized as the loyal fans. Along with Westlife's comeback concerts entitled 'The Twenty Tour', Indonesia once again had become one of many countries chosen as their special place to come back.

Sometimes, those loyal fans of Westlife called as die hard fans because they always there for following any news about Westlife from the very beginning in 1999 until the year of 2019. It means that most of those loyal fans aged from 25 to 45 years old. It is very interesting because generally loyal fans will tend to be dominated by teenagers (Sullivan, 2013). Based on that fact, the researcher is interested in doing the research to explore about how fandom and cyber fandom work on those Westlife fans as well as to know more about the fandom context towards Indonesian Westlife fans (and further will be mentioned as Westlifers).

The present research seeks to describe about the fandom affected Westlifers and the communication happened between the fans itself. In order to address the issue, the following research questions will guide the study:

1. How fandom and cyber fandom (Westlife Indonesia) work towards Westlifers?

2. What kinds of fandom context to be appeared in Westlifers?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Fan Culture**

The term “fan” was firstly appeared and used in the late of 19<sup>th</sup> century. As time goes by, the term “fan” had developed into several perspectives such as a group of people who tend to wear their favorite sport teams, a group of people who download or record their favorite TV shows, a group of people who are willing to queue just for buying the concert tickets, as well as a group of people who can strictly explain about every single detail from their idols (Lewis, 2002: 1). In short, fans refer to a group of people who have such big enthusiasm for certain things that they loved. In this modern era of technology, fans are quite great target for media.

Actually, being a fan is not that simple. Being a fan means that he or she won't only watch or hear or read about their idols, but they will also translate into such cultural activities by sharing ideas and perspectives to other fans, as well as being involved into fans community that are having similar interest (Jenkins, 2006: 40). Being a true fan also means that someone will put his or her idol as the centre of the universe. Then, he or she will soon to have the desire to interact and connect with any other fans all over the world. Furthermore, fans are considered to be a group of individuals who are particularly active by discussing, sharing, having similar activities in order to tell everything about their interest. Jenkins (2009) said that fans are the one who can change watching culture to become participant culture.

### **Fandom and Cyber Fandom**

Any kinds of vessel which shades the fans can be mentioned as fandom. The word fandom is basically just like fans club which can be regionally, nationally, or even internationally based on how big is the influence from the idol itself. Someone's life in digital media might be very different with their life in the real world. It can happen because some fans tend to think that fandom is actually the right place to be free from social isolation that they have faced in the real world. In digital media or social media, fans will usually feel more freedom to express their feelings and emotions than in the real world.

Basically, fandom can be said to be social engagement and this kind of social engagement can also happen in the digital media so that it is called as cyber fandom. Inside the fandom and cyber fandom, there is something which engages their members, and it might be something like their dependency to their idols, to know everything update about their idols. The only difference between fandom and cyber fandom is about its media: actual media and social media or digital media. In the context of fandom culture, it is found that there are four fandom contexts as stated by Lucy Benneth (2014: 2):

- a. Virtual communication
- b. Creativity
- c. Knowledge or information
  
- d. Civil strength or organization

In the aspect of virtual communication, the fans will need most to have such good communication and interaction with other fans that have the same idol. This kind of virtual communication can then become such real communication if those fans brought it into reality or face-to-face interaction. Usually, this virtual communication will include something like fan speak and fan jokes.

Then, about the aspect of creativity, it can be said that it is including anything related to the creativity of the fans to create something innovative or different from others. The main objective of this creativity will usually refer to dedicate something valuable to their idols by producing fan edit, fan fiction, fan cover, meme, and many more digital things.

And about the knowledge or information aspect, the fans will basically tend to give a bunch of important and update information to other fans out there. Merely, the information will come from the fan base or fandom to provide any news and update information related to certain idols so that it can fulfill the needs of fans who are likely to be the first person to know about updates from their idols.

And the last aspect is about civil strength or organization which is not less important. The organization can include any activities such as doing several fan projects, donation in the name of their idols for the social goal, or even event like birthday projects for their idols. These kinds of activities can be said to be proof that fanatic fans are not always associated with any negative terms and perspectives because they can do something positive in the name of their affection to their idols.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Furthermore, this research will use qualitative descriptive method in order to describe more about how fandom and cyber fandom work towards Westlifers as well as to explore more about fandom context appeared in Westlifers. This research used purposive sampling technique in which a sampling where is taken through taking the data sources based on some reasons and considerations appropriate with the objective of the research (Pawito, 2007). This purposive sampling technique has used to choose informants based on some criteria (the informants must be Westlife's loyal fans at least for ten years, aged 25 to 45 years old).

Basically, the population of this research includes all those Westlife fans who tend to watch the concert of their idol in certain cities in Indonesia (Jakarta, Palembang, Magelang, and Semarang). Westlife had been held their comeback concert entitled "The Twenty Tour" all around the world, including in Indonesia. This research will only focus on Westlife's Indonesia concerts. The concerts held in these places:

- ICE BSD City South Tangerang – Jakarta on August 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> 2019
- Jakabaring Sport Center – Palembang on August 18<sup>th</sup> 2019
- Borobudur Temple East Java Magelang – Yogyakarta on August 31<sup>st</sup> 2019
- Sam Poo Kong Temple – Semarang on September 1<sup>st</sup> 2019

The sample of this research consists of 21 fans from two days concerts in South Tangerang. The researcher has involved as participant in those two days concerts in order to be able to easier reach out for those needed informants. The concert in South Tangerang had been chosen because the researcher got the information from fandom 'Westlife Indonesia' that the fans came in those two days concerts were coming from all around Indonesia.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **a. How Fandom and Cyber Fandom (Westlife Indonesia) Work Towards Westlifers**

Westlife Indonesia is popularly known throughout Indonesia as the biggest fan base of Westlife since the year of 2009. It means that this fan base has been operated for ten years now. Even after Westlife had announced about their split in the year of 2012, Westlife Indonesia still exist to support each member of Westlife. After Westlife disbanded, this fan base focused on organizing about some events related to Westlife's member's solo project.

This fan base has accommodated the fans of Shane Filan, Mark Feehily, Nicky Byrne, and Kian Egan during the split of Westlife as a boy band.

Fandom is actually cannot be separated from any interactions happened inside of it. The interactions happened meant to be the interaction between the fans and the idols, as well as the interaction between the fans and the other fans. Fandom 'Westlife Indonesia' is considered to be the best place for Westlife fans throughout Indonesia to be able to know each other through communication in social media (Whatsapp group, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). The Westlife fans will be able to get to know each other through fandom 'Westlife Indonesia'. Besides that, they will also be able to know any updates related to their idol as well as information and sharing about their beloved idol.

Based on some interviews, it is known that most of those Westlife fans had been the fans since the early career of Westlife, as can be seen in the table below:

**Table 1**

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Being Westlife fans since ...</b>	<b>Age</b>
<b>A</b>	1999	30
<b>B</b>	1999	29
<b>C</b>	2001	33
<b>D</b>	2000	30
<b>E</b>	2000	31
<b>F</b>	1999	34
<b>G</b>	2000	31
<b>H</b>	2001	30
<b>I</b>	2001	28
<b>J</b>	2001	28
<b>K</b>	1999	33
<b>L</b>	2002	27
<b>M</b>	2003	29
<b>N</b>	2003	26
<b>O</b>	2002	25
<b>P</b>	2005	26
<b>Q</b>	2003	29
<b>R</b>	2000	28
<b>S</b>	1999	32
<b>T</b>	2001	33
<b>U</b>	2001	39

It means that most of them are in the age of 25 to 39. The data was taken from the sample of the respondents who had been interviewed before the Westlife concert in South Tangerang – ICE BSD City on August 6th and 7th 2019. During the two days concerts, the fans came from all around Indonesia including from Denpasar, Medan, Surabaya, Semarang, Yogyakarta, Balikpapan, Kendari, Madiun, Ponorogo, Pematang, Jayapura, Palembang, Sidoarjo, Gresik, Malang, Banyuwangi, Makassar, Singaraja, Depok, Bekasi, Bandung, and Bogor.

The main theory used in this research is a theory from Henry Jenkins (2009, 2013) who had been written a book entitled "Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture" and also a theory from Lucy Benneth (2014). Jenkins' research in his book called *Textual Poachers* showed how fans construct their own culture by appropriating and remixing "poaching" content from mass culture. The fans then would create creative cultural thinking and activities through this "poaching" content.

As Jenkins said that fan culture is also regarded to be examples of participatory cultures. In this case, fans are those who are not only acting like consumers, but also

sometime they act as producers or creators of something creative in the media. In particular, media fandom will encourage creative expression as well as artistic production by its participants.

Jenkins et al. (2009) define those participatory cultures more specifically as the one that consists of:

1. Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement.
2. Strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others.
3. Some types of informal mentorship in which the most experienced members will pass along their knowledge to novices.
4. Members who believe their contributions matter.
5. Members who feel some degrees of social connection with one another and care about other members' opinions about their contributions.

Based on the data from the interview with some of the Westlife fans, it is known that there are many fans who still tend to think that they are not knowing each other before due to far living areas, but they feel like they are connected to each other. It is really suitable with what Jenkins (2009) said about 'members who feel some degrees of social connection with one another and care about other members' opinions and their contributions'. For the example, when some fans had trouble to go to the venue due to their lack of location information, other fans will feel more than happy to be able to help them with directions or even giving them an invitation to go together. The fans' connection is really deep and close to each other even though it was the first time they meet.

Then, there was time when some group of fans had a big project for making Westlife proud to be back as the incredible four pieces, the other fans tend to gather around and directly give the helping hands to make that project successful. The big project called as Westlife Spectrum Mission 2019. This project will tend to invite all Westlife loyal fans to set the screen on their smartphone up to the full brightness based on certain color that has already decided on each class of the concert. Then, they need to set the screen timeout for about five minutes during the song 'Better Man' and 'You Raise Me Up'. For diamond seat, the color chosen will be 'red', and for platinum seat, the color will be 'light green'. Then, for those who are seating in gold seat, they need to choose 'turquoise' color and silver seat will need to set up into 'yellow' color. The reason is that the farthest seat from the stage (silver seat) needs to be recognized by Westlife so that they were given the brightest color of 'yellow'.

All of those fans in ICE BSD really welcoming this Spectrum project and they tend to gather around to make sure that every single fan had this information and they can participate in this Spectrum mission during the concert. The result showed that this big Spectrum mission has succeeded a lot since Westlife had really excited to see the beautiful combined spectrum colors during the last song of their concert as Shane Filan said, '*Thank you Jakarta. It is very beautiful there. Thank you for this great combination of colors you bring to the stage*'. This kind of fans' participation meet what Jenkins said before about 'strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others'.

This is what participatory cultures of those Westlife fans come because here, they don't just acting as customers or fans, but they have been acted to be like creators to create something creative with the main goal to impress their idol as well as to steal their idol's attention by doing the right and the amazing things. This way, it can create such ambience and portrait that Indonesian fans are quite creative, innovative, as well as they deserve the best moment with Westlife. The fans will also consider that Indonesia will always get the first priority when Westlife's going to plan their next tour. For more, it can be added as 'members who believe their contributions matter' (Jenkins, 2009).

The existence of fandom (in the context of offline media or direct media) and cyber fandom (in the context of online media or digital media) had both had similar importance to the fans. From the interview and the observation during Westlife Twenty Tour, most of the respondents said that they need to be able to meet and contact all Westlifers both through offline and online media so that they will feel a lot easier if they need something from the members of the fandom they have followed. What they need is not only about updating information, but also about the chance to get the promoted price for any Westlife merchandises and stuff, as well as to be able to do something together will all members participated such as doing the garage sale or even helping others by giving donation, and many more. The existence of this fandom of Westlife Indonesia has an essential role when it comes to help others such as the members of this fandom will easily to help another member who needs their help due to their sickness, death, or any bad conditions.

#### **b. The Kinds of Fandom Context to be Appeared in Westlifers**

There are a lot of fans out there who tend to feel freer and more creative if they are inside the fandom they have created and at least fandom they need to be inside of it, rather than they are outside that fandom (Jenkins, 2009: 85). Joli Jenson in Storey (2010: 157) said that there are two different pathology types of obsessive fans: men (individuals who are obsessed with their idol) and women (individuals who are being seen as a group of hysterical people). In his theory, Jenson said that a group of fans are being seen as a kind of 'unnatural' or 'wild' behavior. Those fans are not normal, and we are normal people. All those fanatic behaviors can also be seen from fans' consumption pattern, fans' activities, as well as from how those fanatic fans adore their idol.

For instance, it can be stated based on the researcher's observation during those two nights concert that the majority of Westlife fans will feel a lot hurtful if there is anyone outside their community who give negative statements about their idol. During those two nights concert in ICE BSD City, most of those fans feel dissapointed on what the promoter did to the venue. Those loyal fans think that Westlife don't deserve stage and venue like this. The negative comments come from diamond VVIP seat fans who tend to look at giant black curtain in front of their seats when they should see the giant stage. This kind of condition makes those fans feel angry because they have paid two and a half million rupiah in order to get one diamond seat. They feel angry not just because they are given with such bad stage, but they feel angrier because they are willing to give Westlife the best memorable nights in Indonesia to welcome their come back after seven and a half years being separated.

That kind of situation during the two nights concert in ICE BSD City has proven that loyal fans can literally do anything if something does not meet their own expectations in the strength of their community. This category of fan is something that Jenson called as fanatic fans with unnatural and wild behavior. They are not only being able to give revenge to other haters of their idol, but they also be able to call for boycott for any promoters that failed to fill out their satisfaction. Even though Jenson said that fanatic fans are not normal, but Westlife's fanatic fans had already done numerous positive things such as helping others, helping to create a better world to live, understanding each other, as well as making Westlife Indonesia as a great place for anyone who wants to make peace.

Also, Benneth (2014) stated that there are four aspects of fandom context which are really affected by the advanced development of the internet and social media: (1) virtual communication, (2) creativity, (3) knowledge or information, and (4) civil strength or organization. From this research, the researcher gets the result as follows:

#### **(a) Virtual Communication**

In the fandom context of virtual communication, most of the communication happened through social media, even though there were also certain communication happened directly through offline media. Pertiwi (2017) had once said that the social identity of fans in the social media might be different from their real social identity in the real world. But, almost all of these Westlife's fans accounts are appeared to be similar with their own identity.

Most of them are using their real pictures, although there are some of them who tend to use Westlife's pictures or one member of Westlife as their profile pictures in their social media. But the use of pictures rather than themselves is only temporary because they often change their profile pictures with their real pictures or family pictures. The reason on why they use Westlife pictures is because they want everyone knows when Westlife has released their brand new single or album or any updates from their all time favorite boy band.

In the context of virtual communication, all those Westlife's fans will usually tend to interact with each other through fan speak or fan jokes in social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and mostly via Whatsapp chats. Benneth (2014) argued that one of the best things that fans love to do in the context of fandom is being able to speak out loud about what's on their mind as well as to be able to interact and sharing jokes to other fans. The kind of fan jokes for those Westlife's fans is more like sharing or speaking about members of Westlife which make them to feel happier and freer. For instance, they often share the conversation into being 'international wives of Westlife' or in Indonesian, we can say the term of '*halu*' which refers to any conversation or statement that is far from reality.

Sometimes, those Westlife's fans had also have what is called as 'fan speak' in which the conversation or language that is only being understood by the members of the fandom Westlife Indonesia. It can be in the form of written texts, symbols, or any acronyms. For the example, they often share 'fan speak' about Cailean (Mark's fiancé) to become baby Kailan or share information about what G is doing with the kids while the lads away from home (G here refers to Nicky's wife named Georgina).

## **(b) Creativity**

Several years ago, as Jenson said in Storey (2010): fanatic fans are those who are loyal, wild, a group of hysteria people, and terrifying; however, now those loyal fans had transformed into a group of people who are creative, active, and innovative. In other words, these fans are not only doing their role as customers to certain media, but they also doing some of production activities such as creating something as the result of acceptance while consuming the media. As Jenkins (2013: 201) said that those fans will directly try to produce certain cultures after they have finished in consuming culture texts. And the result of this production is basically called as 'fan production'. This 'fan production' can be appeared in the form of fan cover, fan edit, meme, and fan fiction.

The form of 'meme' appeared in Whatsapp chats where there are numerous Westlife pictures showed up as stickers by adding some texts to describe about expressions. And then, there is also the form of 'fan edit' in which the fans make several Westlife pictures and adding some effects in order to make the pictures to look a lot more interesting. They can produce this 'fan edit' when Westlife released new single or new album or any tour updates so that it can be read by people around the world with more attractive way.

And then there is 'fan fiction' in which one member of Westlife often being used as the main character of a story made by those loyal fans. Shane Filan is a member who is most often to become the main character of any fans' stories. And the last is about what Benneth said to be the most creative way that fans can make: 'fan cover'. Just like the title, 'fan cover' refers to fans who generally often do the cover version of some Westlife songs. They often upload the cover version through YouTube channel or even through the singing application of Smule, and other fans had re-upload and share those videos so that this fans work can be appreciated by wider audiences.

**(c) Knowledge or Information**

Just like the title, knowledge or information fandom aspect means that fan base or fandom itself is being used as a place where fans can gather any updating information related to their idols. Thus, the main objective of this fandom is to make sure that all loyal fans have been fulfilled with all their needs. In other words, fandom will usually have certain forum in which make the fans possible to share everything together with other fans through social media (Fauziyah, 2014: 4).

Moreover, related to this information, there are six parts of updating information that often followed by Westlifers: (1) Releasing of single or album, (2) Releasing of official merchandise, (3) Releasing of DVD concert, (4) Schedule of tour or concert, (5) Awards won by Westlife, and (6) News and update about Westlife and family activities. There are also some loyal fans who tend to make special account to dedicate their loyalty to Westlife such as making Instagram account, Facebook account, Twitter account, and YouTube account where the contents are all about Westlife.

**(d) Civil Strength or Organization**

Fandom is basically showed an active effort from the loyal fans in order to be able to reach certain goal. Usually, the form of this civil strength is through several basic activities such as doing the voting to make sure that their idols can win the award as well as doing the streaming with the main goal to increase the media consumption. For instance, those fanatic fans tend to gather around to stream the first come back single from Westlife entitled 'Hello My Love' so that the single can become the number one hit in the UK, Ireland, Europe, and Asian charts. All those activities are categorized as 'fan project' in which those loyal fans tend to do anything in order to ensure that their efforts worth for making the mission accomplished.

Actually, civil strength or organization for doing the 'fan project' has a goal for making Westlife proud and feel welcome in Indonesia. Furthermore, there is also another civil strength as stated by Benneth: during each of Westlife's member's birthday, the loyal fans will always create such birthday project. For instance, in this October 9<sup>th</sup>, with the aim to celebrate Nicky Byrne's birthday, the fans all over the world had spread the campaign entitled 'Plant A Tree' by creating the project which invites all Westlife fans all around the world to start the reforestation fundraiser for Nicky as a birthday present. In order to save the nature and the earth, those fans make donation to rebuild the rainforest together and all the donations will be used to help a non-profit organization to fund reforestation projects all around the world.

There are a lot of Westlifers who tend to follow the donation for the sake of celebrating Nicky's birthday as well as for saving the whole world to become a better place to live. With all these kinds of activities, loyal fans or fanatic fans are no longer describing as die hard fans who always want to support and show their love to their idols in such negative ways, but it can make people start to realize that those fanatic fans can also do something great and benefit for the rest of the world.

Then, fans will usually also follow the 'fan project' for making a donation for those who are in needs of helping hands. For example, there are several activities being done by Westlifers to help their sisters and brothers in Maluku, Palu, and any other regions in Indonesia for the big earthquakes a few times ago. These Westlifers family are not only helping those who are in needs in Indonesia, but also helping those who suffered in some other countries by collecting donation to the reliable non-profit organization such as UNESCO, WHO, and UNICEF.

## CONCLUSION

Basically, fandom can be said to be social engagement and this kind of social engagement can also happen in the digital media so that it is called as cyber fandom. Inside the fandom and cyber fandom, there is something which engages their members, and it might be something like their dependency to their idols, to know everything update about their idols. The only difference between fandom and cyber fandom is about its media: actual media and social media or digital media.

This research aims to explore more about fandom and cyber fandom towards Westlifers as well as about the kinds of fandom context as appeared in Westlifers's activities. In this era of modern advanced technology, Westlife fans are still relying on the offline media while they are still using the online media to communicate and interact with their idols and also with other fans all over the world, especially fans in Indonesia. The main reason is because most of those Westlifers are being on the age of 25 to 45 years old in which in this range of age, people will usually become more mature so that they need both fandom and cyber fandom which can accommodate their needs of being closer to Westlife and other fans. It is suitable with what Lewis (2002) said that people at the age of 30 above tend to get more mature as well as their needs of contacting through online media has been decreased than when they were teenagers. People at this age will have the needs of communicating through offline media more than through online media.

And about fandom context itself, it can be concluded that there are four main aspects of fandom context as stated by Benneth (2014): (1) virtual communication, (2) creativity, (3) knowledge or information, and (4) civil strength or organization. Each of those aspects are combined perfectly in the activities of Westlifers as they did the 'fan speak', 'fan jokes', 'fan edit', 'fan fiction', 'fan cover', 'meme', 'fanbase', and 'fan project' in order to support and show their endless love and affection to their all time favorit boy band ever, Westlife.

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