

Attitudes of Fans toward Anime YouTubers (AniTubers):

A Case Study on the Influences of Commercialisation on Participatory Culture

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary participatory culture, everyone can create and share their artistic creation with relatively low barriers (Jenkins et al., 2006), enabling more people to participate (Jenkins et al., 2015). However, participatory culture has long been criticised for its exploitative nature with free labour, such as the inequality of those who do and do not get paid for their creation (Jenkins et al., 2015). At first glance, the emergence of participation's commercialisation on platforms like YouTube can solve this problem. Unfortunately, more issues arise in participatory culture, and law enforcement has intervened. For example, Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulates online space by enforcing guidelines on disclosing the sponsored relationship between creators and companies (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023). As almost everyone engages in participatory culture and monetisation is common in the digital era, it is crucial to understand how the commercialisation of participation influences netizens' relationships. Thus, by delving into the AniTube space, this essay examines fans' attitudes towards AniTubers under various types of monetisation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Participatory Culture in the Digital Era

The concept of participatory culture was first introduced by Jenkins in 1992, which he further developed in 2006 in light of the technological, economic and cultural developments at the time. In participatory culture, members strongly support each other's creation and believe their contributions matter, facilitating their social connection (Jenkins, 2006). Additionally,

Jenkins highlights the Web's role in enabling more people to participate, emphasising its significance in participatory culture in 2015.

Anime YouTube (AniTube) under Participatory Culture

YouTube is part of the participatory culture ecosystem that encourages participation through media production and content sharing (Jenkins et al., 2015). The YouTube videos on Japanese anime or manga are labelled as Anime YouTube (AniTube) content (*Anime YouTubers / Wikitubia / Fandom*, n.d.). Early AniTube content mainly consists of anime music videos (AMVs), anime clips, and anime trailers (High, 2022). Later, review, recommendation, ranking, and analytical content on anime and manga emerged (High, 2022). Reviewing and criticism have long been essential to the fan community (Jenkins, 1992). Before YouTube, otakus created content promoting and critiquing otaku culture (High, 2022). Nowadays, this type of AniTube content centres not only on “anime text and its consumption” but also “its place within a series, a medium, an oeuvre, and an industry” (High, 2022). In a sense, YouTube is a tool that facilitates amateur and non-commercial media production, enabling otaku's participation in the AniTube space.

Commercialisation of AniTube

The commercialisation of AniTube began with the rising popularity of anime in the West (High, 2022). AniTubers become influence marketers that produce content for not only passion but also economic return, complicating the relationships between platform, sponsor, creator, and fan (High, 2022). Three types of AniTube content commercialisation are investigated in this essay.

Sponsored AniTube Content

Social media entertainers, including AniTubers, rely heavily on sponsorships and affiliate links as revenue streams (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Companies, such as Bokksu that offers a Japanese snack subscription service (Bokksu, n.d.) and NordVPN that provides a VPN service (NordVPN, 2023), sponsor content by AniTube channels, such as *Gigguk* and *Scamboli Reviews*, regularly.

Under the FTC guidelines (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023), AniTubers must disclose their sponsored relationships to viewers. Thus, AniTubers usually separate paid promotions from their usual content by dedicating sponsorship to only part of their videos.

AniTube Content with Anime Industry Involvement

With the globalisation of anime funding and distribution, the anime industry involves in AniTube through numerous means. Firstly, manga distributors like Book Walker and VIZ Media sponsor AniTubers, such as *Gigguk* and *Mother's Basement*.

Moreover, AniTubers connect with anime industrial agents (High, 2022). AniTubers, including *Gigguk* and *CDawgVA*, joined the talent agency GeeXPlus under Book Walker (Kelts, 2020).

Furthermore, anime distribution corporations produce their own AniTube content. The anime streaming service Crunchyroll has created its own AniTube content (Figure 1), such as anime reviews and video essays, since 2017 (High, 2022).

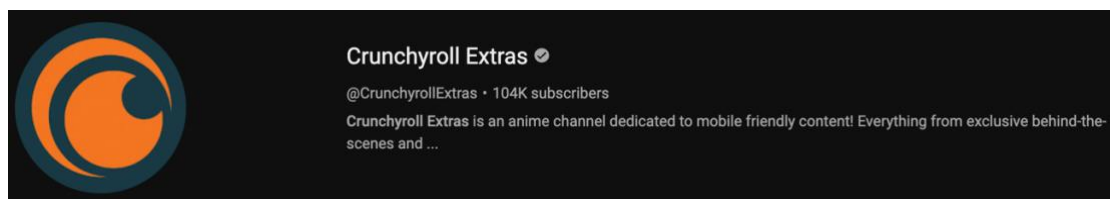


Fig. 1: *Crunchyroll Extras* ' YouTube Channel Profile

AniTube Content Supported by Digital Patronage

Digital patronage allows content creators to receive recurring financial support directly from their fans (Hair et al., 2022). According to Bonifacio et al. (2021), relational labour is a primary part of digital patronage, emphasising long-term, blended support relationships. Interpersonal interactions, including direct messaging, and mass communication, such as publishing videos, are involved in digital patronage (Bonifacio et al., 2021). As compensation to patrons, digital patronage creators offer exclusive content, ranging from progress updates to behind-the-scene, directly through platforms like Patreon (Bonifacio et al., 2021).

Within the AniTube space, some employ digital patronage as part of the commercialisation. At the same time, a few, namely *Super Eyepatch Wolf* and *Pause and Select*, rely on this fan funding method as their primary revenue model, as reflected in their respective Patreon Pages (Patreon, n.d.-a,b).

ANALYSIS: FANS' ATTITUDE UNDER ANITUBE'S COMMERCIALISATION

Sponsored AniTube Content

Sponsorships benefit the relationships between AniTubers and fans unless sponsor companies are involved in controversy, which damages AniTubers' trustworthiness.

With the transparency of sponsored relationship between sponsored AniTube content and AniTuber enforced by FTC, the receptions from fans are widely positive. Sponsorships themselves are even integrated into their community, illustrated by the memes circulated in the online community. Take the Trash Taste Podcast, started by GeeXplus and hosted by three AniTubers (GeeXPlus, n.d.), as an example. In its *r/TrashTaste* subreddit, fans have made memes about sponsorships and received positive receptions (Figure 2). With them becoming the inside jokes among fans, sponsorships may even bring the community together, benefiting fans in the long run.

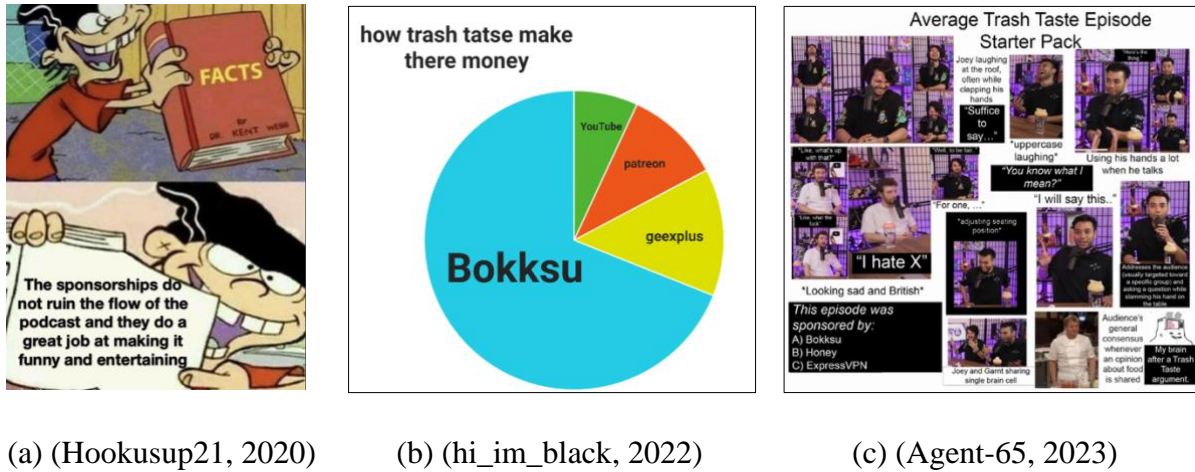
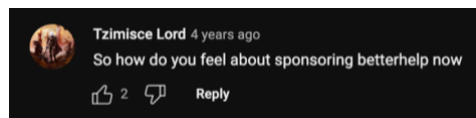
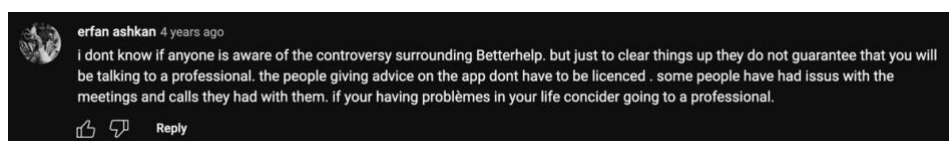


Fig. 2: Memes about sponsorships on the *r/TrashTaste* subreddit

With recommendation and evaluation content are a crucial part of AniTube, credibility is vital to AniTuber. Thus, the shady practice of the sponsor companies may jeopardise AniTubers' reputation, harming AniTuber-fan relationships. For instance, BetterHelp's controversy affected YouTubers sponsored by the corporation. This therapy platform was under fire for its questionable practices, including sketchy therapists (Bartov, 2022) and selling users' personal health data (Federal Trade Commission, 2023). Within the AniTube space, channels like *Mother's Basement* (2018) do not receive much backlash with their sponsorships with BetterHelp. Yet, this situation may be due to the indifference of AniTube fans towards the platform, reflected by the lack of response towards comments about the BetterHelp controversy under the video (Figure 3).



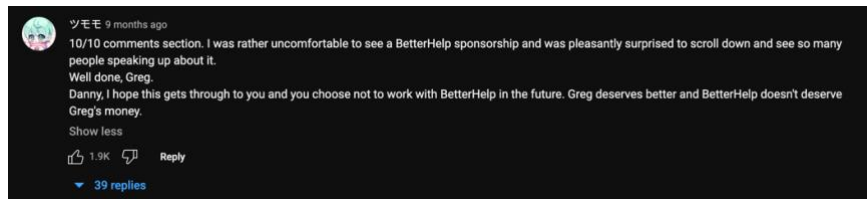
(a)



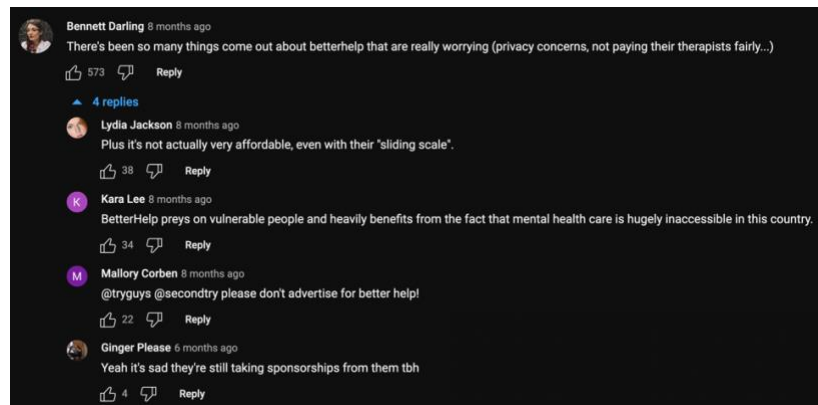
(b)

Fig. 3: Screenshots of comments concerning BetterHelp under *Mother's Basement's* video

The difference is tremendous compared to people's reactions in other demographics (Figure 4).



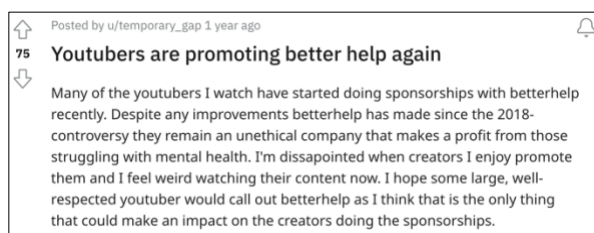
(a) (Danny Gonzalez, 2022)



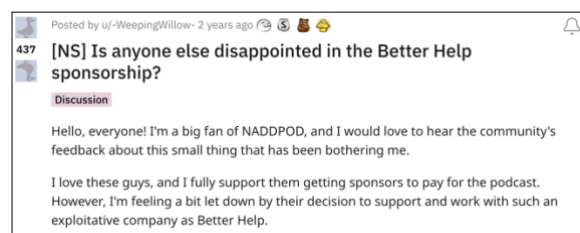
(b) (The Try Guys, 2022)

Fig. 4: Screenshots of comments under videos sponsored by BetterHelp

Although some YouTubers continue to promote BetterHelp and normalise the issue, discussions on social media indicate that some fans were unpleasant with the YouTubers' choice of sponsorships and did care about who YouTubers collaborate with (Figure 5). The situations outside the AniTube space demonstrate that sponsor companies can tarnish AniTuber's reliability from fans' perspectives.



(a) (temporary_gap, 2022)



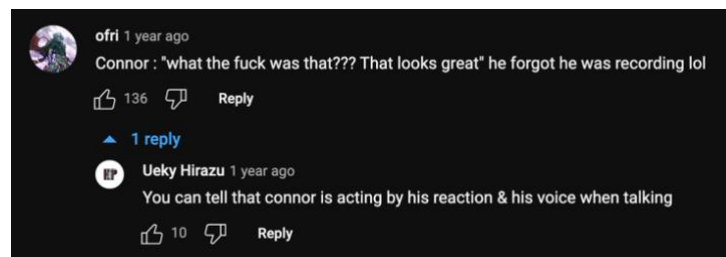
(b) (-WeepingWillow-, 2021)

Fig. 5: Discussions about BetterHelp Sponsorships with YouTubers on Reddit

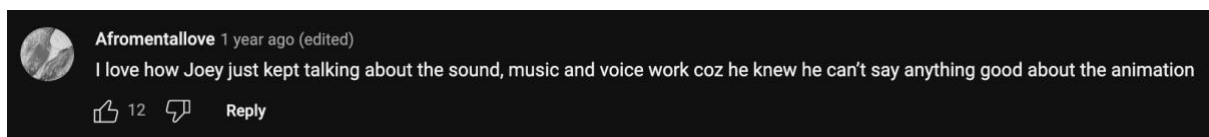
AniTube Content with Anime Industry Involvement

It is common for AniTubers to share their opinions on anime and manga in their channels, recommending their favourites. Unfortunately, working directly for and controlling content by anime production and distribution corporations can sabotage the authenticity of AniTubers' assessment (High, 2022), influencing the relationship between AniTubers and fans. The connection between control and authenticity can be reflected by *Trash Taste's* AniTubers, *CDawgVA*, *Gigguk*, and *The Anime Man*, collaborations with anime companies.

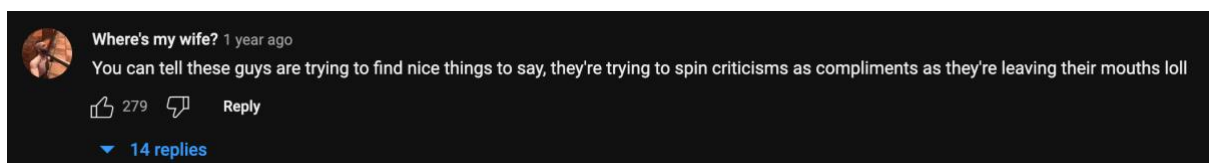
Netflix, a major funder of Japanese anime production (High, 2022), sponsored the members of *Trash Taste* and *Mother's Basement* to react to their anime *Records of Ragnarok* (Netflix Anime, 2021). Comments under the reaction video (Figure 6) reflect that viewers analysed the AniTubers' reactions, believing AniTubers' opinions were bogus because they were paid to promote the anime.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Fig. 6: Screenshots of comments under the *Records of Ragnarok* reaction video

With the involvement of anime companies, AniTubers' opinions may be skewed. Based on the belief that AniTubers only voice out positive views on the anime for sponsorships, fans feel the need to be hypercritical to distinguish whether AniTubers' comments are honest. Sometimes, they may be unable to differentiate or even over-analysed, doubting the AniTubers and creating cracks in the AniTuber-fan relationship.

By employing a different approach than Netflix, Book Walker sponsored a segment of the Trash Taste episode (2020) and promoted their platform without sabotaging the authenticity of the AniTubers. At the beginning of the sponsored segment, the Trash Taste members indicated they would spend ten minutes talking about their favourite manga and light novels available on Book Walker freely for their sponsorship. With the side-tracks and swearing, this unscripted conversation matched members' usual energy and did not feel forced, making their opinions sincere. At the same time, with their constant mentions of the name Book Walker, their segment effectively reminds fans can purchase manga and light novels on the platform. The lack of comments concerning the video sponsorship reflects fans do not feel unsatisfied with the AniTubers. Book Walker did not put too much control over the sponsor section in the episode, making the opinions of the AniTubers feel authentic to the fans.

AniTube Content Supported by Digital Patronage

Relational labour is a key part of digital patronage (Bonifacio et al., 2021). AniTubers rely on their long-term relationship to receive financial support from fans. Thus, creators strive to maintain a trustworthy relationship with patrons.

AniTuber *Pause and Select* maintain the creator-patron relationship through transparency of the financial situation. On his Patreon page (n.d.-a), he stated that "all excess money gets put aside for future projects. None of this will go into [his] own pocket." He keeps track of his expenditure and shares his financial statements via Discord (Patreon, n.d.-a). With

fans willing to donate to him, the creator lives up to their expectations by disclosing as many financial details as possible. His attitude towards money handling makes fans trust him with their money.

CONCLUSION

Overall, by focusing on AniTubers and their fans, this essay highlights the influences of commercialisation on participatory culture. The concepts of participatory culture and commercialisation within the scope of AniTube were first presented. Then the essay examines the attitudes of fans towards AniTubers when sponsorships, the anime industry and digital patronage were involved. Regarding sponsorships, the reputation of the sponsor companies links to AniTubers' reputations. If sponsorships are not handled appropriately, fans may be disappointed by the creators' choices. Concerning the anime industry's involvement, AniTubers' authenticity of their expertise may be compromised when too much control is enforced by the company. When fans begin to pinpoint the insincere opinions of AniTubers, they analyse and are critical of AniTubers' reactions due to their distrust. In terms of fan donations via digital patronage, AniTubers strives to build a trustworthy relationship with fans by disclosing financial expenditures with them regularly, making fans feel safe about how their money was spent. In short, the case study on AniTuber reflects that commercialisation influences the trust of content creators under participation culture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [Agent-65]. (2023, April 16). *Average meme* [Online forum post]. Reddit.
https://www.reddit.com/r/TrashTaste/comments/12o586w/average_meme/
- Alvarez-Monzoncillo, J. M. (2023). *Dynamics of Influencer Marketing : A Multidisciplinary Approach* (J. M. Álvarez-Monzoncillo, Ed.). Taylor & Francis.
- Anime YouTubers / Wikitubia / Fandom*. (n.d.). Wikitubia.
https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/Anime_YouTubers
- Bartov, S. L. (2022, November 28). BetterHelp Patients Furious at “Sketchy” Therapists. *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/betterhelp-patients-tell-sketchy-therapists-1762849>
- Bokksu. (n.d.). *About Us / Japanese Snack Box / Bokksu*.
<https://www.bokksu.com/pages/about>
- Bonifacio, R., Hair, L., & Wohn, D. Y. (2021). Beyond fans: The relational labor and communication practices of creators on Patreon. *New Media & Society*, 146144482110279–. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211027961>
- Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. R. (2019). *Social media entertainment : the new intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York University Press.
- Danny Gonzalez. (2022, July 1). *Trying To Find The Worst iPhone Game* [Video]. YouTube.
<https://youtu.be/fSlAuweAhsA>
- Federal Trade Commission. (2023, March 14). *FTC to Ban BetterHelp from Revealing Consumers’ Data, Including Sensitive Mental Health Information, to Facebook and Others for Targeted Advertising*. <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2023/03/ftc-ban-betterhelp-revealing-consumers-data-including-sensitive-mental-health-information-facebook>
- GeeXPlus. (n.d.). *Trash Taste / GeeXPlus / Tokyo-based talent management and global media company*. Trash Taste | GeeXPlus | Tokyo-based Talent Management and Global Media Company. <https://www.geexplus.co.jp/en/creators/trashtaste/>
- Hair, L., Bonifacio, R., & Wohn, D. Y. (2022). Multi-platform practices among digital patronage creators. *Convergence (London, England)*, 28(5), 1438–1456.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221104990>
- High, M. (2022). Cultural mediaries on AniTube: Between fans and social media entertainers. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 38.
<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2022.2251>
- [hi_im_black]. (2022, October 28). *bokksu really coming in clutch* [Online forum

- post]. Reddit.
https://www.reddit.com/r/TrashTaste/comments/yf5ayc/bokksu_really_coming_in_clutch/
- [Hookusup21]. (2020, December 19). *The sponsor sections are funny* [Online forum post]. Reddit.
https://www.reddit.com/r/TrashTaste/comments/kg4ldr/the_sponsor_sections_are_funny/
- Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers : television fans & participatory culture*. Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU Press.
- Jenkins, H., Itō, M., & boyd, danah. (2016). *Participatory culture in a networked era : a conversation on youth, learning, commerce, and politics*. Polity Press.
- Kelts, R. (2020, February 3). *GeeXPlus brings anime YouTubers to Japan*. The Japan Times.
<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2020/02/03/general/geexplus-brings-anime-youtubers-japan/>
- Mother's Basement. (2018, July 8). *How Yugioh Helped Me Deal Depression* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/YfMxuqtiM_I
- Netflix Anime. (2021, June 16). *Record of Ragnarok Reaction / Anitubers get HYPED! / Netflix Anime* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Yu8efgPv35E>
- NordVPN. (2023, April 18). *NordVPN*. <https://nordvpn.com/>
- Patreon. (n.d.-a). *Pause and Select | creating videos on things | Patreon*.
<https://www.patreon.com/pauseandselect>
- Patreon. (n.d.-b). *Super Eyepatch Wolf | Creating Videos | Patreon*.
<https://www.patreon.com/Supereyepatchwolf>
- [temporary_gap]. (2022, January 21). *Youtubers are promoting better help again* [Online forum post]. Reddit.
https://www.reddit.com/r/youtubedrama/comments/s9at52/youtubers_are_promoting_better_help_again/
- The Try Guys. (2022, August 13). *The Try Guys Get Hypnotised* [Video]. YouTube.
https://youtu.be/eQhl_eYwDtw
- Trash Taste. (2020, October 17). *Exposing Our Degenerate Side (ft. sydsnap) / Trash Taste #20* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/DNDUe3oZygQ>
- [-WeepingWillow-]. (2021, April 20). *[NS] Is anyone else disappointed in the Better Help sponsorship?* [Online forum post]. Reddit.
https://www.reddit.com/r/NotAnotherDnDPodcast/comments/mufw3s/ns_is_anyone_else_disappointed_in_the_better_help/