

Anime Platform Crunchyroll and Otaku Culture:

A Case Study on the Relationship between Fan Gatekeeping Practices and Platforms

ABSTRACT

Fan gatekeeping behaviours can be observed in many fandoms, especially in cyberspace. The attitudes of fans within the same community are conflicting towards these practices: some regard gatekeeping as necessary, while others believe it is toxic. Examining why gatekeeping behaviours occur in fan culture is vital to understand both sides of the story. Scholars, including Fathallah and Yodovich, have provided insight into this issue by focusing on gendered gatekeeping behaviours. Yet, they fail to tell the whole story as gatekeeping practices happen regardless of gender. Given Rae's case of gatekeeping on Crunchyroll, this essay centres on this anime platform and otaku culture. Platforms' role in the fan gatekeeping issue is proposed by applying Steinberg's concept of platformisation. This essay concludes that platforms play a crucial part in fan gatekeeping practices when they threaten the community's status quo.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, female TikTok star Addison Rae tweeted that she downloaded Crunchyroll, an anime video-on-demand app, onto her phone (Figure 1). Some otakus, "hardcore fans of anime and other forms of Japanese popular culture" (Miller, 2020), were excited about the prospect of more people enjoying anime (Figures 2 and 3), while others were enraged and engaged in gatekeeping (Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 1: Rae's tweet about her download of Crunchyroll (2020)



Figure 2: Supportive response to Rae's tweet (Ren aot 133, 2020)

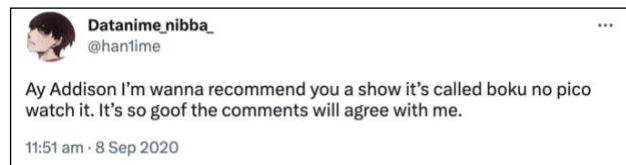


Figure 3: Supportive response to Rae's tweet (Datanime_nibba_, 2020)

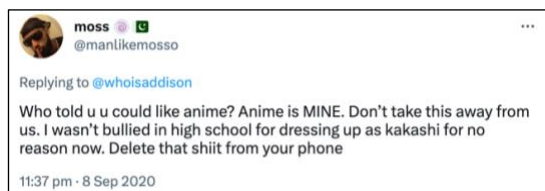


Figure 4: Gatekeeping response to Rae's tweet (moss, 2020)

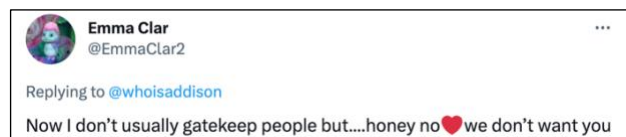


Figure 5: Gatekeeping response to Rae's tweet (Clar, 2020)

According to Fathallah (2022), these gatekeeping behaviours often blame others for disgracing the fandom and giving its favoured texts a lousy name. These practices are prevalent in many fandoms, and the attitudes towards these practices are two-fold: gatekeepers embrace these acts by claiming this can keep bad players from the community (Pierce, 2022), while others believe barring people from participating in the community is toxic (Novella, n.d.). When inspecting its causes, many scholarly works point to gender studies, identifying gender bias (Scott, 2019) and male insecurities (Yodovich, 2022) as the factors. They provide a sensible explanation of why Rae was gatekept. Yet, when fans' gender identities are not presented, gatekeeping behaviours still occur (Figures 6 to 8).



Figure 6: Anime gatekeeping tweet (Ellis, n.d.)



Figure 7: Twitter thread sections about fake anime fans (AkenoIsBae, 2020)



Figure 8: Gatekeeping tweet about not being an anime fan (HunterxHunterGOAT, 2020)

Given Rae’s case of gatekeeping on Crunchyroll, this essay suggests that platforms play a role in the fan gatekeeping issue by focusing on the Western anime community and examining the relationship between the anime platform Crunchyroll and otaku culture.

FAN GATEKEEPING THROUGH THE LENS OF GENDER

Many recent studies examined this issue from the perspective of female audiences in fandoms. In other words, they focus on gendered gatekeeping behaviours within contemporary fan culture. Take Scott’s research (2019) as an example. After situating her examination within the scope of toxic technocultures, she discussed the gender biases and theorised the “spreadable misogyny” within digital geek culture. Scholars, such as Yodovich (2022), delved into the

gendered issue deeper by centring only on a specific fandom. In Yodovich's case, she provided insights into the gatekeeping problem by studying the men-dominated science fiction fandom. She argued that the gatekeeping practices occurred due to the insecurities of male fans after their marginalised fandom became mainstream. Some felt threatened and motivated to maintain the status quo in their fandom by gatekeeping female fans.

However, as addressed by Yodovich (2022), due to its scope, her investigation did not include male fans' experiences despite them also encountering gatekeeping in the fandom. This limitation applies to other works on gendered gatekeeping practices. Thus, further research is warranted to understand why gatekeeping happens regardless of gender.

METHODOLOGIES

Since fans' behaviours are hard to quantify, qualitative research methodology was employed during the study. The whole investigation progressed from specific observations to broader generalisations and theories. After finalising the essay's focus on the otaku culture issue, the anime community conflicts were observed through social media. In light of the many individual occurrences of gatekeeping practices in the fandom, existing literature examining this pattern was studied. Since those research works do not fully fit the fan gatekeeping habits, this essay hypothesises that platforms may participate in gatekeeping practices regarding Rae's tweet (2020). With Dr Zhang's advice, Steinberg's concept of platformisation (2019) is applied as the theoretical approach to assess the hypothesis.

DISCUSSIONS

This section inspects the platform Crunchyroll's influences on the otaku culture and its role in gatekeeping practices.

Crunchyroll: Platformisation of Anime Contents

Began as an anime piracy site for people outside of Japan in 2006 (Forbes, 2009), Crunchyroll is an anime-focused streaming service (Lyons, 2021) that is owned by Sony Group Corporation (Crunchyroll, n.d.-a). Crunchyroll is a leader in the anime distribution industry (Miller, 2020), with 5 million paid subscribers and 120 million registered users worldwide (Ankers-Range, 2021).

Crunchyroll is a platform with its platformisation of anime contents. Before elaborating on why this is the case, it is crucial to understand the concepts of platforms and contents first due to their integrated nature. According to Steinberg (2019), contents are the “first step in creating value out of digital data, making data into goods.” Platforms follow up with an “infrastructural and transactional basis for value creation.” As a contents provider, Crunchyroll underwent “the process of becoming a platform”, namely platformisation (Steinberg, 2019), after transforming into a transactional platform and contents platform. Specifically, Crunchyroll is a transactional platform that provides anime contents as goods to users with ad-supported or on a subscription basis (Crunchyroll, n.d.-b), and a contents platform that allows user-generated contents to enrich anime contents (Yukari, 2023). In a sense, Crunchyroll is a platform that distributes third-party anime contents and accepts users’ contributions to anime contents.

Crunchyroll as Transactional Platform: Changes in Mode of Transaction

Crunchyroll’s changes within its transaction mode led to the otaku culture’s rise.

Historically, Crunchyroll was an illegal transactional platform that distributed unlicensed anime contents, and sustained itself through ad sales and donations (Bertschy, 2008). Since imported media products were marginalised in the Western market (Jenkins, 2004), piracy platforms, including Crunchyroll, were the primary source of anime contents

distribution. Due to these platforms' illegal nature, promoting anime contents to non-fans through mainstream approaches was impossible, making anime culture a niche.

The turning point came when Crunchyroll became a legit streaming platform in 2009 by removing copyright-infringing materials and distributing licensed anime contents (Loo, 2008). Currently, Crunchyroll users can either watch anime contents for free with ad-supported or pay to watch contents ad-free and have full access to Crunchyroll's library (Crunchyroll, n.d.-b). Additionally, users can stream anime contents on any device via browsers and apps (Crunchyroll, n.d.-b). Besides, this legal transactional model allows Crunchyroll to collaborate with third-party companies, including Loot Crate (Figure 9) and Higround (Figure 10). These transaction changes facilitate Crunchyroll's anime contents to appear in the mainstream market.



Figure 9: Loot Crate anime partnership with Crunchyroll (Buckley, 2020)



Figure 10: Higround anime partnership with Crunchyroll (Goldman, 2023)

Nowadays, anime fandom's border has been expanded, and more people, including big-name celebrities (Figures 11 and 12), enjoy anime contents.



Figure 11: Kardashian's tweet about her obsession with anime (2018)



Figure 12: Jordan's tweet about Dragon Ball Z and Naruto characters (2018)

Crunchyroll's transformation from distributing pirated to licensed anime contents changed otaku culture's position in the Western market.

Crunchyroll as Contents Platform: Creating a Close-Knit Community

As a contents platform that accepts user-generated contents via multiple means, Crunchyroll brings otakus together, making otaku fandom a close-knit community.

When Crunchyroll was a piracy site, otakus could upload their fansub anime contents. Due to language barriers and marginalised imported media products in the past (Jenkins, 2004), fansubbing played a significant role in anime's global flow (Miller, 2020). Although subtitling anime contents took place outside Crunchyroll, the act of sharing made otakus proud of their contributions to the community.

Furthermore, the web forum, which was discontinued in 2022 (Yasushi, 2022), and the comments section under each episode of anime contents allows users to share their thoughts with others, building bonds between community members through participation. For example, users can connect by engaging in different topics, such as reactions to the latest anime releases (Miller, 2020), and discussing the anime contents akin to how Crunchyroll advertised in its announcement (Figure 13). These methods effectively develop a supportive community within Crunchyroll. Yet, it should also be noted that toxicity occasionally arises, such as the conflict in Figure 14.

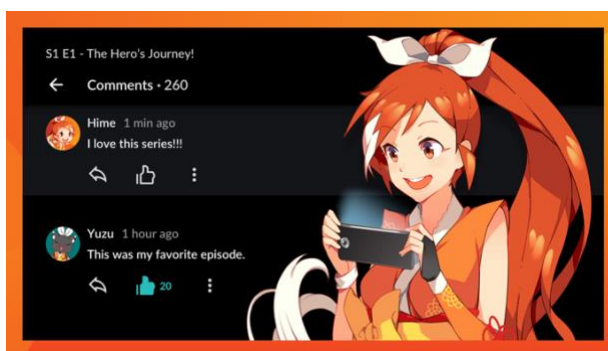


Figure 13: Comment section promoted by Crunchyroll (Guest Author, 2021)



Figure 14: Example of toxic comments on Crunchyroll (Mikel The Introvert, 2022)

In short, contents contributions via fansub sharing and contents engagement via forum and comments sections lead to strong bonds between otakus.

Crunchyroll's Role in Otaku Culture's Fan Gatekeeping Practices

By examining Crunchyroll's effects on the otaku culture as a transactional and contents platform, one of the reasons gatekeeping occurs is Crunchyroll's threat to the culture's status quo.

With Crunchyroll's mode of transaction, otaku culture shifts from marginalisation to mainstream in the market. Anime contents are exposed to more people with the platform's collaborations and easy accessibility. Simultaneously, there is the intimate otaku community on Crunchyroll, a user-generative site, since the early days. When non-otakus, like Rae, decide to start watching anime contents on Crunchyroll, some otakus are uncertain whether these unknown newcomers would impact the community's dynamic. As toxicity already exists in the community, they felt the urge to regulate their community to avoid worsening the situation, such as by distinguishing between 'fake' and 'real' anime fans and keeping those 'fake' fans away. This may also explain why some gatekeeping practices evolve around the anime contents a fan watches. Like those mentioned above (Figures 6 to 8), otakus argued that people who watch mainstream anime are not 'real' anime fans. Since first-time watchers of anime contents usually begin with mainstream anime, otakus may use the type of contents to differentiate between newcomers and long-time fans. Hence, after introducing more people to anime contents, Crunchyroll threatens the tight-knit otaku community, leading to gatekeeping behaviours.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, by delving into the anime platform Crunchyroll and the otaku culture, this essay highlights the role of platforms in fan gatekeeping behaviours. After exploring the existing research on gatekeeping, the influences of Crunchyroll as a transactional and contents

platform on the otaku culture were examined respectively. Then Crunchyroll's impact on fan gatekeeping practices was analysed.

Like the current study on gatekeeping practices, this essay's limitation is its scope, focusing on Crunchyroll and the otaku culture. The investigation above fails to prove that platforms generally influence fan gatekeeping habits. However, we can conclude that Crunchyroll plays a crucial part in fan gatekeeping practices within the otaku culture due to its threat to the community's status quo. Referencing the above examination, otakus that participated in gatekeeping treat Rae's statement about downloading Crunchyroll as a threat that may ruin the otaku community. In otakus' eyes, Rae is not only an influencer that decides to try new stuff but a possible danger to the otaku culture.

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