

EnstarsTwt 101: Exploring the Organizational Characteristics of the Online *Ensemble Stars* Fandom

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Abstract

Being a fan is not anymore about merely binge watching one's favorite media, collecting merchandise, and enjoying one's passion and love in solitude. The conduct of activities as a fan can now be done within the context of a group, which is illustrated by the existence of fandoms over the years. *Ensemble Stars*, a Japanese *joseimuke* mixed media project, is among one of many growing fandoms in the 21st Century, with the said project being one of the most popular among its types, alluring audiences and thereby gaining fans beyond geographical boundaries. The fandom, primarily existing online, illustrates characteristics attributed to being a unique form of organization. This study, in particular, seeks to understand what these characteristics are within the context of the *Enstars* fandom, through an exploratory research conducted primarily with an online focus group discussion. The findings revealed characteristics about the following: (1) its members, who are known among each other through their favorite characters, or by the roles they assume based on their activities; (2) their interactions, primarily centered on and organized through discussions of narrative and casts; (3) their norms and regulations, founded on a collective idea of fostering a safe space, which arise when discourses occur either among individual members, with the media itself, or with issues of misinformation, and (4) their influence to larger structures and social actors, which influence the very media they are a fan of, attesting to its existence as an organization and not merely being a collective of individuals fans put together.

Keywords: *Ensemble Stars*, fandom studies, X (social media), organization of fandoms

1.0 Introduction

With the growth of society throughout various fields—the entertainment industry, information age, among others—development is happening in a way that discussion of fandoms has become relevant now more than ever; Liu [1] emphasized that fandoms have an influence by contributing to the ways in which culture industries of film and television change. This study implies an acknowledgement of the prominence of a group of individuals operating outside the standard norms of society, creating impact within the context that they are situated in. There are also discussions pertaining to discovering the fandom in itself, with Malik and Haidar [2] answering questions that reveal the types of individuals that constitute a fandom, the different roles that they assume, and the variety of activities that constitute interactions among its members, thus providing a more descriptive analysis.

However this acknowledgement may be, there are still some concerns that can be raised with regards to discussions present in studies of fandoms today. A notable point would refer to the scope of different “types” of fandoms present in the literature. In particular, there are some fandoms which are yet to be

substantially discussed within the academic sphere. One such example of this case would be fandoms of *joseimuke* games. To define the term, *joseimuke* (女性向け) would translate to “for women”. Consequently, “*joseimuke*” is an umbrella term to refer to those wherein “...the female audience is specifically targeted during the development and marketing process of a women’s game” [3]. Nonetheless, not all games for women can be classified under this term. Like how *manga* as Japanese comics, is characteristically different from Western comics, there are cultural implications behind specific media types which makes the origin of a specific project an important consideration in its categorization.

As such, it can be seen that some fandoms, including *joseimuke*-centered ones, are still unexplored within the literature of fandom studies. To illustrate this, through a brief search in Google Scholar, I have typed different sets of keywords to compare the number of results that can be found for each corresponding topic. The chosen keywords, along with the approximate number of results of the quick search are: “television fandom” with 57,300 results; “video game fandom” with 40,700 results; “K-Pop fandom” with 8,590 results; and “*joseimuke* fandom”, with 36 results.

Given this concern pertaining to underrepresented forms of fandoms, this study aims to provide an example particularly for those centered on *joseimuke* games. In particular, the media chosen for this study is a mixed media project called Ensemble Stars (stylized as Ensemble Stars!!, and abbreviated as *Enstars*), created by the game company *Happy Elements* (abbreviated as *Hapiele*), which stands as one of the leading titles in the *joseimuke* genre in terms of both popularity (in terms of average registered players per month) and in-game sales [4] according to Game-i, an information analysis site specializing in game sector stocks [5], unofficial but widely used by fandoms and gaming communities to assess the success of games not only within the *joseimuke* genre, but across all categories and game types. Accordingly, *Enstars* almost consistently hits first place in the website’s monthly charts. As of August 1, 2023, *Enstars*’ Official X page has declared to reach 16 million downloads for the Japanese version of their mobile game [6]. Since its release in 2015, it has expanded its presentation beyond its origin as a mobile game, adapted by formats such as manga, anime, live concerts, and stage plays (theatrical performances).

As one of the most prominent *joseimuke* media, *Enstars* has gained a huge fanbase over the span of nine years. Being a technologically-oriented media helped reach a wider scope, as fans outside of Japan are also permitted to engage in *Enstars* and their fellow fans. The impact of the game furthered after the release of an English version of the game in 2022, broadening their consumer demographic to a global audience. In light of this, *Enstars* is currently an ongoing media project, regularly releasing new contents and updates till this day. With the anticipation of their 10th anniversary, it is expected that this milestone will bring in new content to draw in curious new audiences, while fueling the interest of existing fans.

With its relevance in current society, one can see that fandoms are a discussion worth academic inquiry. Numerous studies for some more contemporary fandoms have been made over the past two decades, such as video games and the K-Pop industry. Meanwhile, Japanese media outside of anime and manga are underlooked in the academic scene, thereby prompting this study. By exploring the *Enstars* fandom, one may gain a deeper understanding of other forms of interactions, regulations, roles, and norms present among a specific group of devoted fans. Thus, the general objective of the study is what are the organizational characteristics that comprise the fandom of *Enstars* in X X (formerly Twitter). The study shall answer the following specific questions: (1) What are the different roles assumed by members of the *Ensemble Stars* fandom? (2) How does interaction happen among these members? (3) How does the *Enstars* fandom maintain their activities? (4) How do members of the fandom regulate behaviors within its community? (5) How does the fandom operate in contexts outside of its own organization?

2.0 Literature Review

To contextualize the study in the current literature, the definition of “fans” will be explored. Studies of fandoms in online spaces, as well as a deeper dive into Japanese (mixed) media shall also be done, to survey what has already been studied, and what possible themes can emerge from this research.

2.1 *The Fan vs the Ordinary Consumer*

It is of utmost importance to emphasize the characteristically-enthusiastic nature of the fan, the individual that makes up any fandom that has established its existence. In particular, the conceptualization of “the fan” is always made in comparison to any other type of individual who has consumed or spectated a certain media. As an audience, the latter are comparatively more “disengaged”, due to their lack of attachment that prevents them from being fans. Hills [7] stated that this emotive feeling evoked to fans may manifest in the form of expertise and extensive knowledge about the object of their fanaticism, which characteristically feels like “a sense of ownership”, ultimately integrating their feelings for the media-object to their overall self-identity.

Moreover, it is revealed in a study on Chinese fans of K-Pop group GOT7 that there is an active and rather conscious effort from fans themselves to separate themselves from the ordinary audience [8]. To do this, they engage in “specialized, managerial, or unskilled labor as well as collaborations in the translocal and transnational fan networks”. Some examples of these activities include purchasing officially-released merchandise, formally enlisting as members of the official fan club, attending concerts, and streaming the required number of certain songs. This variety of activities expects frequency in conduct—fans themselves feel an internal pressure to accomplish these activities, seemingly as a form of “labor” to repay the media for the entertainment that they provide. If a fan does not meet this expectation and are complacent on being a fan using free means, they are negatively referred to as “baipiao”. However, the act of active and conscious consumption is not something against their will, as this so-called fan labor is done with the explicit goal of promoting and ensuring that the object of their fanaticism will be “successful”, which in return ensures the continuity of the media they are a fan of.

2.2 *Fandoms as Producers*

On the other hand, being a “fan” is not bound only by the act of consumption. Due to a need to express their attachment and feelings to the object-media of their fandom, members of a fandom learn to become “creators”, or producers themselves. Through the framework of “textual poaching” by Jenkins [9], this activity of production upholds a participatory culture that creates the fandom. This process of creation is expressed through various media landscapes, which materializes as outputs of various forms, including but not limited to art, edited videos, handicrafts, and so on. These said outputs are the artifacts used by Soriano as the main unit of data for his research [9], where he unravelled the constructed meanings attached to these objects as well as the process in creating them. His study highlights the “textual poaching” or creation-and-consumption phenomenon of fans in their community as a way to both express themselves by sharing their ideas, thoughts, and opinions through various outputs, which in turn “remixes” and shapes content within that fandom, and collaborate with fellow members towards knowledge production and problem solving by means of engaging in critical discourse or providing information to others that they have gathered from their active engagement with said media, which in turn also ensures circulation or active flow of information within fandoms to avoid “stagnation”.

Notably, this production does not only influence activities within and among fans in a fandom, but may also influence the media itself to which fans are attached to. Galuzka [10] describes a “new economy of fandom”, a condition in which fandoms are empowered to communicate and cooperate with artists

directly, potentially involving themselves in the creative process of the actual and official media. This particular phenomenon is made possible with the onset of social media, allowing fans to directly interact with, for example, artists or celebrities directly, rather than through indirect means by reaching out to these personalities' companies first. To illustrate this, an example scenario would be if a netizen responds to an artist's tweet, requesting to collaborate with another artist to cover a song. This said artist can potentially read the reply firsthand, and, if they so desire, will comply with this request, which ultimately leads to the fan as an indirect co-creator. In other words, fans also potentially shape the media that they are engaged with, primarily due to their own self-interests that they wish to realize.

2.3 Fandoms in Online Spaces

Existing literature also discusses fandoms in relation to online spaces. One discussed the online community of the *Monsta X* fandom on Twitter, stating that fans utilize the online space to interact with fellow fans who, otherwise, they cannot connect with due to geographical distance, as fans also share that they cannot find fellow fans within their vicinity [2]. Though they are mostly anonymous toward each other, reluctant to disclose any personal information to their fellow fans, the *Monsta X* fandom remains interconnected and bonded through their mutual love for the K-Pop group, even stating their preference for engaging and forming friendships and connections online in the community than in real life. Instead of using personal information like name, gender, and place of residence, fans, as accounts in Twitter, will instead establish themselves through certain roles, determined by the kind of activities that they conduct. There is a wide variety of roles among the *Monsta X* fandom, some of which include fan artists, video editors, event guides, update reporters, translators, and archivers, each of which play a particular yet equally-significant role to maintain the activities within a fandom. Understanding fandoms as a "community of practice", fans engage in these multitude of activities with and among each other, which are often doable within the online space, such as streaming events, hashtag trending, and selca days (posting selfies using a hashtag). For many of these fans, using an online platform such as Twitter is the only way for them to be part of a fandom—a collective community—instead of conducting their fan activities in solitude.

Sometimes, social media functions more saliently than as merely a tool for connection. Yin and Xie [11] discussed how "social media logic" in Chinese online fandoms shapes patterns of communication, behaviors, and expectations among members of a fandom. Weibo, a social media platform for Chinese users, has unique features that influence the way in which fandom participation and interaction is conducted. For example, it is easily distinguishable for a member of a fandom to know which accounts are and are not fellow fans, as a fandom member would know "where and how to post effectively". There are functional differentiations for each topic, depending on its purpose, intended audience, and even an expected format. Weibo's structure as a social media designates specific "places", known as pages, where one post is more appropriate to be put in than on others, depending on how visible a post is expected to be. "Visibility" is defined by how many users will view a post, as some pages are more exclusive and meant for a certain audience, while others are more public and can be read by all registered users of Weibo. Thus, within the said social media, fandoms are expected to comply with the existing organized system structured around the "logic" of Weibo's features.

Certain social media's features are integral to ensuring that fandom activities can be retained, to a point where, incompatibility between the platform and fan activities can even deter or cause fandoms to ultimately migrate from one social media to another [12]. Factors such as changes in design and policies, as minor as they may be, when deemed incompatible with fandom activities, can be seen by fans as an "active effort" to push fandoms out entirely. Some examples of said factors include a policy change in Fanfiction.net which prohibits publishing of mature content, accompanied by deletion of existing works with mature content. Many users expressed their disappointment as they perceived this change as a form of censorship. Consequently, this made them migrate and prefer other sites, such as Archive of Our Own

(AO3), a fanfiction website characterized by their leniency in allowing all sorts of content and themes. Moreover, AO3's policies emphasized their dedication to copyright advocacy, which gives fans a sense of security and protection with their own works that are posted in public online spaces.

2.4 Japanese Media: Mixed Media and the Character-Narrative Focus

Proceeding to the topic of fandom in relation to the specific media in question requires understanding the characteristics of Japanese media and its specific traits. We start by understanding Steinberg's concept of media mix [13]—a “Japanese and transnational practice of creating, marketing, circulating and engaging with cultural goods serially across media”. Simply put, it is a broad field, encompassing the various techniques for how media is presented, distributed, merchandised, among others. Oftentimes, Japanese media utilizes a wide range of media forms, in order to convey certain characters, narratives, and worldviews.

Continuing from this argument, Azuma [14] expounds on otaku culture, or a type of culture specifically by fans of Japanese media, through his “database consumption theory”, stating that “Japanese otaku take pleasure in consuming and using the database of the traits of characters of anime, manga, video games, and other popular culture forms”. Between reading a relatively static manga, watching it be animated and accompanied by voices, to taking it a step further and encouraging firsthand engagement through video game, each media entails a different manner by which media from a single project can be enjoyed. Thus, having different sources of media to consume, fans remain occupied and entertained through the dynamism of Japanese media.

Thus, through the multifacetedness in the way Japanese media presents itself, fans tend to be more oriented towards focusing not on the “experience”, but with the narratives and characters that remains consistent throughout the various media forms. Thus, fans tend to remain attached and focus the most on such aspects; Foster [15] compares this fanaticism like how other fans would feel an admiration, sometimes even parasocial relationships to celebrities, “creating an intriguing facet of fan engagement”. In his study of Splatoon fans, they invest heavily in characters that have demonstrated idol-like traits, with fans empathizing heavily with the experiences of the characters Shiver, Frye, and Big Man “celebrating their victories and developments, while empathizing with their struggles”.

3.0 Methodology

In understanding social organizations, it is crucial to look into a variety of perspectives, hence, the study utilizes qualitative methods. As Hesse-Biber [16] has stated, such a type of methodology puts privilege on subjective and multiple understandings to uncover the “meanings” behind various social phenomena, or in this case, organizational characteristics of fandoms—a social group drawn together by their passion for the game in question.

Homogeneous sampling was employed for this particular study, allowing the researcher to select individuals who are especially knowledgeable about the topic being studied [17], while also taking into consideration the importance of availability and willingness for involvement in the study [18]. As such, chosen participants would be fans of *Ensemble Stars* who satisfy the following criteria: (1) identifies themselves as members of the fandom on X at any point, (2) at least eighteen (18) years of age at the time of the study, and (3) is able to participate in an online focus group discussion (FGD) in Discord.

Participants are recruited through social media, primarily in X, utilizing the hashtag feature to increase the reach of the post. The chosen hashtags were “#EnsembleStars” and “#Enstarries”. Participants are requested to contact the researcher via direct messages on X. Through this, a total of six participants were

initially found. However, this was reduced to five (5) as one participant's schedule was not compatible with the schedule of the FGD, which was decided to accommodate as many of the participants' schedules as possible.

Data will be sourced from the participants' narratives, providing an insider perspective of the topic in question, using the actual words, language, and meanings that the participants have used to make sense about the fandom that they are a part of. As such, the manner in which these specific narratives (particularly those that were received in the chat box), shall be quoted exactly as how they are written, preserving spelling and typing conventions. This allows to retain any implicitly reflected characteristics and dynamics among participants, and thus being able to reveal "natural" interactions to supplement purposefully-constructed narratives.

As the study aims to look into dynamics and interactions among members of a community, a focus group discussion was utilized. van Eeuwijk and Angehrn [19] describes a focus group discussion (FGD) as "a qualitative research method and data collection technique in which a selected group of people discusses a given topic or issue in-depth, facilitated by a professional, external moderator". With the chosen method, interaction among group members can unravel certain notions and shared knowledge by directly responding to each others' answers in real time, which would otherwise not be revealed from a series of individual interviews.

In particular, the data is collected through an online mode of focus group discussion, in consideration of the fact that the topic of study is a community existing in an online space. Discord, an instant messaging platform, is used as the site for the FGD, with the said platform being the most popular communication platform around games [20]. Its unique features offer multimodal forms of communication, which include access to multiple text and voice channels all at once within a single group of users, usually called a "server" (which is not to be confused with the hardware that hosts these channels; a *server* is the terminology used by Discord to describe structures that are close to group chats in functions, but operate with more complexity). The accessibility of using voice chat and messaging functions simultaneously provided options for participants to join the focus group discussion via text (written communication) or through the call (verbal communication), depending on their preference.

While the FGD lasted approximately two hours, additional data gathering afterwards using the Discord server, to clarify any points or inquire about any additional information. Several considerations were made to ensure that the study was ethically conducted, such as utilization of an informed consent form, catering to the convenience of all participants in scheduling the FGD, and non-collection of any personal data about the participants. All the data that was obtained from the study, including the transcripts, are carefully safeguarded by the researcher, and shall only be used for its intended purpose.

Thematic analysis is then done to process the findings; the researcher started from a thorough review of the data, both in text (from the chat boxes) and audio format (from the recorded voice call). After familiarization with the data, initial analysis was done through identification of prominent key ideas from the direct statements in the transcripts, from which significant ideas will be derived from them. Similar ideas will be clustered, then these groups will be compared and contrasted. Specific phrases are highlighted when they provide more vivid and unique descriptions and/or metaphors to their narratives. This is followed by the coding process, where the most salient ideas of each cluster is provided with a code—a word or short phrase—that are eventually elaborated into a corresponding theme. The coding process and its subsequent themes are derived inductively, guided by the research questions that were initially identified. The process of induction was chosen to highlight the exploratory nature of this study, and gain an understanding of the *Enstars* as an organization from the ground up, while using available theoretical frameworks or existing studies for a deeper analysis of the collected data.

The researcher recognizes that there are limitations to their study, affected primarily by practical considerations that prevent them from conducting the said research at a bigger scale, including the similar demographic characteristic of almost all participants in terms of place of residence and age, as well as the relatively small sample size. Essentially, this paper does not depict findings generalizable to the overall population in question. Regardless, steps are still undertaken by the researcher to improve the reliability of the data. Careful consultation is made with the research participants even after the initial conduct of the FGD. Whenever necessary, the researcher would contact the participants to consult and validate the data and analysis, ensuring that it remains reflective of the latter's experiences.

4.0 Findings

Through the online FGD, the organizational characteristics of the X *Enstars* fandom were revealed. To begin with, specific terminologies are used within their fandom, which will first be defined. Doing so also helps provide a better understanding of the discussion for subsequent sections of this study.

Enstarrie. The unofficial but collectively-used term to refer to fans of Ensemble Stars, derived from the official hashtag “あんスタ” [Ansuta] or a shortened version of the title. This is a general term, however, it was noted that not many old players use that term nowadays. For the purpose of the paper, however, this term will be utilized.

Producer. This is the title used to refer to the [nameless by default] self-insert character in the game. Within the *Enstars* fandom, this term is used for fans to identify themselves with a specific character, unit/group, or sometimes, a character pairing in the game, often choosing their favorite character or group. Typically, this term is shortened to just “-P”, and is attached as a suffix using the format [Character/Unit/Pairing]-P (ex.: Rei-P, Undead-P).

Aside from *Enstars*-specific terms, others that are commonly used within other types of fandoms, as well as in online communities, are utilized. The term “mutual” (sometimes, “moot”), for example, is used in X/Twitter to signify an individual whom one has a reciprocal relationship with in terms of following. On the other hand, “ship”, from the word “relationship”, is used to refer to [often] romantic pairing of characters. Lastly, “yume”, common among *joseimuke* fandoms, is derived from the Japanese character “夢” [yume], which means “dream/to dream”, and refers to a practice where one pairs, or “ships” themselves with a [typically fictional] character.

It is also important to preface the discussion by emphasizing the online nature of the FGD, which had implications on the manner in which the interactions during the data collection process had gone. The setting replicated a typical social setting that fans would often find themselves in, as they are able to retain their online personas, thus remaining anonymous to both fellow participants and the researcher, while engaging in the conversation. Moreover, they are able to freely communicate in the manner they find best expressing themselves with, either through chat (text) or in call (verbal). This includes typing quirks, grammar conventions, vocabulary, and use of emojis/symbols, among other things. To preserve the exact narratives of these participants, especially in chat, quotations will be written exactly as how the participants have typed them.

4.1 Characteristics and Roles of Enstarries

The most notable characteristic of *Enstars* fan is their appreciation for the story and character elements of the media project, which is shared by almost all members of the fandom. This is best highlighted with the *Producer* title, a terminology that fans used to refer to themselves. One's identification in the fandom is heavily tied to who their favorite characters are, and fans make several efforts to let their love for said

character be known, often by using the customization features in their profiles to reference their characters. With this, it becomes easier for *Enstarries* to remember who their fellow fans are by knowing who their favorite character is.

As such, the fandom would use roles as a more specific means of differentiating themselves, which can be viewed in Table 1 below. The classification is mainly determined by one's engagement in activities. Oftentimes, the specific activities that a fan chooses to prioritize is their primary means of expressing their love and interest for their favorite characters; a content creator will create fan art of their favorite character, a gamer will actively play to rank on events where their favorite group is featured, an *oshikatsu* practitioner will selectively purchase merchandise of their favorite character, and so on.

TABLE 1
Identified roles of *Enstarries* on X

Role	Description
Content creator	A fan who produces any form of <i>Enstars</i> -related content
Gamers	A fan primarily dedicated to the game aspect of the media project
<i>Oshikatsu</i> fans	A fan who actively engages in merchandise collection practices
<i>Yumeshippers</i>	A fan who actively engages in self-shipping practices
Translators	A fan who primarily translates content of the original source material (Japanese) to English or other languages

Content creators are one of the most notable members of the fandom because of their capacity to produce any form of tangible content, typically media, such as [digital] fan art, video edits, cosplay content, and even meme posts. Because their outputs are easily perceivable to the public, fellow fans proactively consumed such fan-made content, supplement to official material released by the game company. Positive reception from their fellow fans may contribute to the motivation of content creators to continue making their fan works. Oftentimes, the actual content is heavily influenced by their favorite characters or units, so a lot of content creators would be devoted to making similar content over and over, and would attract fellow fans that share their specific favorite casts.

Gamers, on the other hand, are those whose activities heavily involve playing the primary form of media that *Enstars* is distributed as. During in-game events, which are often competitive in nature, these fans are seen proactively joining the top ranks in order to obtain as much rewards such as event titles and in-game currency. They make great efforts in strategizing in order to maximize their resources and play using the most efficient means possible, going so far as to structure their gaming practices into their daily schedules. Moreover, they may also engage in the card collection aspect of the game; completing a certain character's cards is a hallmark of their devotion as a fan. There are those who are willing to dedicate real life currency in order to ensure that they are able to obtain the cards of their liking.

The third role refers to the one wherein collection and showcase of fan merchandise is the hallmark of their activity as fans. The term used, *oshikatsu* (推し活), is a Japanese phrase derived from Japanese idol subculture, which loosely translates to "supporting your favorite". In this particular context, support is done in the form of purchasing merchandise as a form of monetary support, and publicity support through the

showing off of merchandise to audiences both within and outside of the fandom. While this practice is actively observed, the *Enstars* fandom does not generally pressure its members to purchase merchandise. It does help that they acknowledge other means and ways of being a fan, reflective of the other roles identified.

Yumeshippers account for another role, characterized by the practice of shipping oneself with a fictional character. Like most other fans, *yumeshippers* tend to have their certain favorite character, though what sets them apart from non-*yumeshippers* is their self-declared romantic feelings, and not simply a fanatic admiration, for their chosen character/s. Thus, they are described to manifest their fan behavior “more intensely” than non-*yumeshipper* fans. Notably, the practice of *yume* is yet another subculture of its own, as the practice is not part of mainstream fan behavior. Among *Enstars yumeshippers*, there are still subtypes, usually classified on the basis of how willing they are to “share” their favorite characters with others [21]. It is more common for *Enstars* fans to be the sharing type, as *Enstarries* express their preference to interact with fans who share favorite characters as theirs. Nonetheless, there are non-sharing *yumeshippers*, although this may deter other fans from interacting with them; Kaye, a participant, shared that non-engagement with non-sharing *yumeshippers* is an acceptable response out of respect for their fellow fan’s preferences.

The last mentioned role is that of translators. As their title implies, they translate source material from the original language, Japanese, into English or other languages, making content more accessible to the fandom outside of Japan. The fandom does not impose translators to have a certain level of proficiency in the Japanese language, although members ensure that they have some degree of familiarity before engaging in translation activities, whether through language classes or from personal experience living in the country. Due to the necessary skill requirement, not everyone can freely become a translator the same way that they could assume other roles. Regardless, those who do become translators are appreciated by the majority of the fandom. Their contributions are vital to the continuity of the fandom’s existence by making foreign content more accessible to the general public. As such, they are said to be the “backbone of the [international] community” that “hold the fandom in place”.

It is worth noting that because any single individual can partake in multiple types of activities, these roles are not mutually exclusive. In other words, an individual can assume one or many of these roles at a time. Additionally, they may start and stop engaging in certain activities at any given point.

Participants have expressed how being a member of the *Enstars* fandom is not characterized by frequency or level of engagement. *Enstarries* do not hold any standards or expectations about this matter, both to themselves and to other fandom members. In fact, Serenios, a participant, shared her views that engagement [with the fandom] is not a necessity for one to be considered a fan. Thus, interacting with the fandom is a purely voluntary and conscious decision that members choose to make. Jel, a participant, citing firsthand experience of their fluctuating fandom participation, stated in chat:

“i kinda mellowed down [in fandom activities] b[e]c[ause] i got busy with uni stuff lol [expression: laughing out loud]”.

(Jel, in chat)

The lighthearted tone in the message, emphasized by the use of the expression “lol”, illustrates how *Enstarries’* fandom engagement is often not made a big deal. Some common experiences that influence the level and frequency of fan engagement include other matters that one may need to fulfill outside of their fandom activities (which in Jel’s case, for example, is their academic responsibility), as well as personal well-being, particularly when fandom activities tend to get stressful due to potential discourse, or when *Enstarries* feel a self-imposed pressure to continue their fandom practices. Such findings notably show a

contrast with Sun's [8], who highlights how fans are pressured to proactively engage in specific fandom practices, both as a responsibility to their object of fanaticism and a means to present themselves as separate from non-fans.

4.2 Form and Subject Interactions of *Enstarries*

Understanding the characteristics of *Enstars* fans reveals what interactions look like and how they occur in the fandom. The most distinct point of discussion would be the centrality of the media project's story and cast in fandom discussions, interactions, and activities, which ties directly to the characteristic of the *Enstarrie* as a Producer.

4.2.1 Narrative-driven interactions.

The reason behind the fandom's inclination to focus on the narrative and character elements can be tied to the history of the media franchise, which initially started as a story-oriented video game, akin to a visual novel with additional resource management elements. With such beginnings, the *Ensemble Stars* franchise put the development of the game's main story and its characters at the heart of the multimedia project experience. It wasn't until the rebranding of the project, done as an attempt of the developers to expand both the project and its demographics, led to the creation of a new version of the game, called *Music*, with rhythm game elements, while *Basic* remained similar to its predecessor. Notably, *Happy Elements*, the game company, put *Music* at the forefront of their promotion, though fans, especially older ones, find themselves more attached to the narrative and characters that they have loved over the years.

The narrative and cast preference can be further highlighted by emphasizing the other significant change prompted by the rebranding: the introduction of new characters and significant progress in the main story. Such updates were much-awaited by the fans, after a relatively static pace in the project's overall narrative that created a demand by the audience for something new. Additionally, this was not only appreciated by its fandom's current members at the time, but even by new potential fans that were drawn in by the updates, with participant *Serenios* calling it a "big peak" in influx of both fandom activity and fan population increase.

Enstar's rebranding, as a major event, is unique and rare in occurrence, since it requires developers to make large-scale preparations and allot significant resources. Regardless, fandom interaction is observed to heighten whenever any major form of content is released. The more regular form of these updates are done during milestones, particularly when the project celebrates anniversaries, or during a special type of event called "Reminisce Events", wherein its content is shown to also deal heavily with the project's main narrative. *Reminisce Events* are a buzz word in the fandom, anticipated by many, and are thus popular and well-loved by *Enstarries*.

On periods where no major update is expected, the fandom's default discussions would, again, center on the narrative, but significant focus is given to those that are newly-released by the developers through regular-limited time events. To ensure that every character has new content, they are featured on a rotation basis. As a result, the consistency of new content and variation of featured characters ensures that all fans would have a chance to enjoy the project's offering, and is incentivized to "stay" and continue their fandom activities, anticipating that the narrative that will be released in the future is something of their interest.

4.2.2 Connecting with fellow fans.

Of course, one can not truly consider an activity as a fandom activity without contextualizing their behaviors and practices to the larger group. *Enstarries* do not enjoy and consume the content in isolation, whether it is from a major release or just the usual regular update. *Enstars*, as a fandom, proactively interact with each other in various ways. Fandom participation often starts with an introduction, not necessarily towards anyone but with the fandom as a whole. The introduction is often formatted as a “promo tweet”, with the term ‘promo’ abbreviated from promotion. The promo tweet is a published post containing concise personal information about themselves, often including their online name, their age (although this is optional), their favorite characters and units, and any other interest of theirs outside of *Enstars*. This is further enhanced by the use of various hashtags (#enstarstwt and #enstars are most often used) to enhance post visibility. Ultimately, the promo tweet is a tool used for the goal of having other people meet them, in order for the fan to form new connections, or “mutuals”. Having one’s ‘follow’ reciprocated is the best indicator of a successful connection.

Posting a promo tweet is a good, but not necessary start to fandom engagement. As a matter of fact, being acquaintances is not even a prerequisite for an *Enstarrie* to interact with their fellow fans. Fandom activity can be as simple as posting a photo of their favorite character in X. Because of the nature of the social media as an interactive space, there is always opportunity for exchange among *Enstarries* in X. Fellow fans, whether they also like the same character or not, may like, repost, quote, and even reply to the post, usually to match the same “energy” as a fellow fan sharing the same feeling and passion for the project. These interactions are done even if fans seldom (if at all) interacted with each other: interacting with stranger’s posts within the fandom are seen as a norm, although *Enstarries* do not really feel that fellow *Enstarries* are strangers to them—there is already a bond developed out of their mutual fanatic feelings. Regardless, forming stronger connections would still serve purpose. For fans who are more acquainted with each other, the level of interaction may go deeper. Interactions may now happen outside of the public eye, often through more private channels like direct messages, and conversations are more sustained. The most notable topic of discussion, as shared by participant Art, would be how fans would interpret the narrative and character-story updates.

All of the illustrated practices are not at all required for any *Enstarrie*, reiterating how being a fan in the *Enstars* fandom is not met with expectations. In other words, one can still become an *Enstars* fan by enjoying content in isolation. Yet, there are those who make the conscious decision to be part of the fandom and actively seek connection with others, fully aware that their fellow fans will appreciate seeing the love and dedication for their multimedia project.

4.3 Fandom Challenges: Issues and Measures for Regulation

While members generally get along, experiences in the *Enstars* fandom is not always harmonious and conflict-free. There are instances when issues arise, creating discourses of various forms; at times, these issues involve fans against each other, during other times, the fandom against the media [and its content and/or creator/s] itself.

4.3.1 Issues of fans against each other

Smaller-scale discourses may occur now and then, which often involves individual fans, or group/s of fans, against each other. Such conflicts are often experienced on a personal level, typically as a result of differences in opinion, and therefore do not usually escalate beyond the parties that are involved. The most common debates are either about: (1) arguments on which character or ship is

“more superior”, (2) which character or unit is more “due”, and thus more “deserving” to be featured, or (3) disagreements about interpretations of details about characters and the narrative.

4.3.2 *Issues of the fandom with the source material*

Larger-scale discourses often stem from issues with the source material or decisions that the game company makes for the game and its other media forms. The issue of retroactive continuity is most prominently experienced. The term, often abbreviated to retcon (used as both a noun and verb) is done when original version of work, often the ones established by a particular series or franchise, are altered, intentionally or otherwise, with new updates becoming inconsistent with previously-established narratives [22]. Emphasizing how much of the fandom’s attention is directed to the media project’s story and its cast, *Enstarries* become alerted when *Hapiele* does any retconning in new releases, which participants say happen quite often.

Retcons aside, another common issue that arises between the fandom and the media project and its material would be the depiction of problematic, often moral or social ideologies and practices in the game’s content (usually in stories). These issues may vary in scale: on one hand, there are the relatively minor problems, such as “lazy” and low-effort content found when newly-released game art look similar to already-released ones; on the other hand, there are more drastic issues, such as depictions of imperialism and bigotry. There were also instances of racism and orientalism, which was the case when *Enstars* released new content where characters are shown to wear stereotypical costumes from SWANA (Southwest Asian and North African) culture (which is not an *Enstars*-exclusive issue but rampant across all *joseimuke* projects [23]).

Serenios, a participant, shared another instance of racist depiction in one of the game’s story:

“it’s mostly because aira will refer to hiiro’s village as backwards basically and hiiro as a ‘savage’ but when you know hiiro is implied to be ainu.....”

(Serenios, in chat)

The derogatory treatment directed towards a Hihiro, a character hinted to be of Ainu ethnicity, an indigenous Japanese group, even if executed by another fictional character, is a cause of concern for *Enstarries*. For one, Producers of the character in question may be disheartened by the immoral behavior shown by the character. More importantly, the fandom, regardless of their favorite character, are against having their beloved media be one that promotes such negative ideologies.

4.3.3 *The dangers of misinformation*

This third identified form of discourse is not particularly a conflict between two “actors” (an individual fan, the collective fandom, the game developers, or other stakeholders). Rather, this is an issue that occurs when anyone in the fandom relays false, often distorted information about the narrative and characters, usually as a result of mistranslation.

It must be reiterated how important the narrative is to the *Enstars* fandom, being arguably the most important aspect of the franchise to them. It, then, becomes imperative that misinformation should not spread, in order for them to achieve the best and most genuine experience possible as fans. However, accomplishing this goal is hindered by certain challenges. For one, the media project is delivered using the Japanese language, which then requires an added step for *Enstarries* to consume its content. This is where translators step up, becoming the mediator between the original material and the greater, non-Japanese-literate international fandom, through the translations that they produce. On

another point, participants have shared that *Ensemble Stars* presents rather unique themes: despite being a media project about idols, *Enstars*' story is described as "deep like the dark web", depicting themes in their narratives such as death, war, religion, politics, among others. While this adds to the charm of the franchise, such themes become an additional hurdle that necessitates even more careful translation practices. Finally, *Enstars* is a media project with multiple side stories and a huge number of characters, all of which are ultimately connected to each other.

4.3.4 Measures for regulating fandom conflicts

In dealing with the aforementioned conflicts, *Enstarries* collectively aim towards the promotion of a "welcoming and safe space" for all fans. Forms of disruptive behavior that can generate discourse against each other are looked down upon—the most typical reaction is a sort of passive-aggressiveness; this is especially the case when unnecessary debates or disagreements are expressed. Of course, members of the fandom recognize that each one of them have their own preferences, but at the same time, they are aware that this must be kept to themselves. When one expresses particularly negative opinions, say, about a specific character, they may be seen as overstepping boundaries of others who may be potential fans, with the latter having their fan experience dampened. As such, members are expected to do their part in maintaining an amicable environment for all. If needed, they are encouraged to maximize social media features such as muting and blocking.

However, not all forms of "disruptive" behavior is exactly prohibited, but reception depends on circumstance. In the case of fandom discourse due to retcons or problematic content fans may deem it necessary to express negative opinions, directed primarily towards the game developers. This is because *Enstarries*' passion for the media project is not one-dimensional: above all, they give much value to the series, especially its story, and therefore are concerned when the creators themselves release content that are inconsistent with the existing narratives or depict problematic messages. This can still be grounded on the principle of creating a "safe space" for the fandom, since these issues can cause some form of upset or distress for *Enstarries*. It is exactly because of their love for *Enstars* that they enjoy their media critically.

With issues of misinformation, fans follow the general rule to be vigilant and proactive when someone is seen disseminating mistranslations or other forms of false information. Translators, with their unique capacity to countercheck content, carry the greatest responsibility. Thus, apart from "policing" general fandom, they conduct their activities with much care, ensuring that their translations would relay the narrative as close to the original material as possible. This is not a codified responsibility, but simply an act of love and passion for their object of fanaticism. Regardless, whether one is a translator or otherwise, there is a consensus that all translations must be done carefully so as to preserve the narrative that they enjoy:

"a lot of people in the fandom are very careful when it comes to translations ... [though] usually its people that can understand japanese and would like to stop people from spreading misinformation"

(Art, in chat)

Arguably the most popular instance of misinformation is seen in the character of Narukami Arashi, which has much to do with her identity as a transgender woman. Aside from being a very popular character, the fandom holds very high regards to the franchise for having LGBTQ+ representation through her character. As such, *Enstarries* collectively make the effort to preserve and protect this aspect of her character especially when translating stories and updates that have her featured. During one instance, when a fan-managed online database posted info about Arashi that

invalidates her gender identity, there was a collective movement to call out the writers that posted the said misinformation. Even though they may not be translators, Arashi-Ps would be some of the most vocal in “calling out” people who falsely relay information about the character in question. Additionally, *Enstarries* who are part of the LGBTQ+ community may also feel more inclined to act on the matter, due to a personal attachment to the issue.

4.4 Beyond the Fandom: The *Enstars* Fandom's Impact

To better appreciate how the *Enstars* fandom can be analyzed as an organization, a discussion of its external characteristics will be made. This allows one to see how the fandom is perceived as a whole to outsiders: such as to fellow media consumers and audiences that are not fans of *Enstars*, as well as how those who are involved in *Enstars* as its developers perceive and react to their target audience.

Fandoms having an impact, particularly a positive one, is deemed important for fans to potentially deepen their engagement in a project, and this can be seen with *Enstars* as well. For new and unfamiliar consumers, it is the fandom that serves as the “gateway” for having a better fan experience, given that those who are already fans would know how to “navigate” the different content available—a knowledge that will be helpful to outsiders. It was shared by the participants that the fandom is generally welcoming to potential new fans, whom they want to share their love and passion with. A new fan's perception of the fandom is greatly shaped by content creator fans, since their outputs (often being memes and fan arts) have great potential to reach wider audiences through social media. Additionally, the presence of translators can also aid in the engagement of non-fans; as the language barrier presents challenges for entry, outsiders may assess their capacity to enjoy foreign media like *Enstars* based on how much translated content is made available. When an outsider, guided by the fandom, finds the fan experience as favorable, they may continue their fanaticism, ultimately becoming a member of the organization. On the other hand, *Enstarries* would find a growing fandom beneficial, not only to enhance their personal experience by having someone to share their moments and experiences of fanaticism with, but also to increase the number of consumers of the media, which consequently ensures that *Enstars* as a project will continue its activity. However, this interaction with new fans is reflects the dynamics the same dynamics that are seen when interacting with already-fans: *Enstarries* tend to be transparent when welcoming new fans, calling out any problems that they perceive with the project, in hopes that potential new fans will also be responsible consumers that will join their cause of desiring a “better media” that they can truly enjoy without any reservations.

Aside from fellow potential consumers, another group that may be influenced by the fandom would be the developers, who are on the production side of the exchange between the fan and their media of interest. While there is minimal direct interaction that happens between *Hapiele* and the fandom, one can still observe the influence brought by the consumers, which in turn, manifests as changes and updates that happen in the media project (albeit selected, because not all changes are a direct consequence of *Enstarries*' reception). Granted, the fandom is one of their biggest stakeholders, and their consistent consumption and positive reception is necessary in order to achieve their own goals, which is primarily that of profit generation.

Arguably the most significant instance wherein *Enstars*' developers perceived positive feedback about their product would be the expansion of the media project by launching a global server, which was meant to finally cater to fans outside of Japan. This global server entailed the release of an English version of the game, which means that much of the content consumed by *Enstarries* is now more accessible than their former experiences. However, having an English release of the game did not mean that global fans would cease to consume content from the original, Japanese release. For one, the content of the English version is not up to date with its Japanese counterpart, which means that any new release from the former version had already been released prior, thus making it lack that feeling of novelty. Additionally, the Japanese release

is deemed by the fans as more “authentic” in a sense that it is the original narrative created by the developers. Meanwhile, the English version of the game is translated officially, which at times is criticized by *Enstarries* as the translations come from the perspective of a corporate entity, rather than that of fans, with the latter being more close to their experiences. This can be connected to the issue of mistranslation discussed earlier, but with this specific context, it is less of a matter of false information and more of an issue of “which interpretation is more enjoyable given their position as a fan”.

Nonetheless, *Enstarries* are not always in favor with the decisions and updates made by the game, which was discussed in the previous section. There are scenarios when the fandom responds to game updates negatively, particularly when they perceive that narratives are retconned and become inconsistent with the already-released story, or when there are problematic themes portrayed in game updates. The fandom is aware of when they should take necessary action to address these issues, and they do not hesitate to direct their actions to the game company. However, *Hapiele*’s response would vary, if they would at all. Participant Art has expressed in chat that although there are instances wherein the fandom’s concerns were acted on upon by the game company, it is more often that the latter stays passive and fails to consider criticism, stating: “*most of the time they dont unless they need to*”.

In the moments when *Happy Elements* does take action, it is most likely done when the situation is dire. For example, issues are most often addressed by the fandom through mass email waves. This is also the least difficult and most feasible action that fans can do. However, the company can easily choose to ignore the messages that they receive, so long as it would not affect the success of their media project. *Hapiele* must perceive a great necessity on their end to initiate sufficient action. Oftentimes, a decline in consumership would be their prompt, but this is not often common. Instead, participants shared an event that did prompt the company to take action, one that is related to the previously-mentioned issue of depicted racism against ethnic Japanese group Ainu. During the release of this event, the fans’ reactions reached extreme cases, going as far as to harass the actual writers of the event story. This knowledge was made available to them, since *Enstars* traditionally credited the author/s with every release. However, after the turn of said events, the following updates omitted the author/s’ names. While not being a minor change, this matter was not a decision taken lightly, further emphasized by how *Hapiele* released an official statement about not crediting authors in new stories moving forward (it was not indicated in the statement as to why this change was made, but it was an open secret to the fandom that the two events were directly related). Regardless, one can see how the company’s responses are still lacking, reserved, and failed to address the root cause of the fans’ action.

5.0 Analysis

Understanding the *Enstars* fandom entails unraveling its characteristics and its implications on how this specific group of fans, albeit merely existing in an online space, identities, unknown to each other and simply unified by the love for a fictional media project, operates as a functional organization, of whom creates actual consequences for its members and other social actors connected to them.

In line with this, the discussion must first begin with analyzing at the level of the individual: an *Enstarrie*. This understanding of the individual fan is only made comprehensible when contextualized within the fandom; the practice of identifying an individual by their favorite character or unit, ultimately attaching that said character to your identity, is relatively unique to their fandom. In addition, the very roles that are shared by the participants are borne out of the real, actual interactions that occur within their space. Such information takes precedence over the more typical details that could pertain to their identity such as name, age, and place of residence (this does not mean that these types of information are not shared, but they are not really as important, or even required to be disclosed among fans).

Echoing Jenkin's concept of textual poaching [9], fandom participation is proactively constituted by the conduct of a variety of activities. The way in which fans determine which ones they will practice, aside from preference, is most likely determined based on their capacities. The more proficient or familiar one is with the said activity, the more likely they are able to express themselves, and their love and passion for the project. This can also explain why an *Enstarrie* can choose to engage in one or multiple roles: being able to conduct more activities allow for greater expression of their fanaticism. In this manner, their expression as a fan becomes more meaningful by means of participation, as they are able to share their products and connect with people of similar interests, rather than simply conducting these activities in isolation.

Furthermore, identification of roles through activities is reflected through the application of the Communities of Practice framework [2]. Every member fulfills a role, as their practices can generate opportunities for interaction among each other. For example, translators relay newly released content, which may spark inspiration for an artist content creator to draw art. If a *yumeshipper* sees this art, they may feel inspired and boost their motivation to play more actively in the game. In other words, there is continuous engagement founded on their shared love for the media project *Ensemble Stars*.

To deepen the understanding of why fandom activities and interactions manifest the way they are, it must be emphasized that being a fan entails more than what an average audience or consumer would do. This may be described as having a "sense of ownership" towards one's object of fanaticism [7], which, in the case of *Enstarries*, is a common occurrence. Members of the fandom are known to have intensive knowledge of the media project that they are interested in, which allows them to engage in more meaningful conversations. Art, a participant, shares that the most common topics of conversations within the fandom are always about "one's interpretation of the [different] stories", which are actively exchanged among each other. Additionally, there is a great emphasis on the narrative and character elements as the main aspect of interest among fans that goes beyond the game's history; on one hand, it is with these elements that one's knowledge can be most extensive, due to the capacity for reinterpretation of fans, with each one being able to have their own "renditions", unique to how others would experience their own, on the other, and reiterating Foster's argument [15], it is the narrative and the cast that are most engaging and easily translatable to different media formats, especially in the case of *Enstars* that has at least two game versions, on top of its other media formats that are made available such as *manga*, *anime*, among others.

In relation to this, one can connect how fandom interaction is structured by means of identifying fellow *Enstarries*. It was shared how regular interactions take form as conversations of fans about the narrative and cast elements, however fans don't simply engage in every discussion that passes by their timeline. Additionally, while *Enstarries* generally appreciate the media project as a whole, they are truly only able to devote themselves to certain parts of the series, lest it leads to exhaustion or fatigue from catching up with many things at once. Therefore, they learn how to manage these interactions by means of choosing which fellow fans they should get closer to and what talks they should join, primarily based on people's specific roles (activity-wise) and preferences (typically in terms of character). In other words, while virtually anyone is allowed to engage with and connect with other *Enstarries* in the fandom, individual fans tend to gravitate towards those who have similar interests (in characters) as theirs, or whose activities they can engage with or prefer to see more of, as shared interests provide more compatibility in their activities and choices of topics for discussion [9]. A testament to this is the creation of cliques or subgroups within the fandom. Some subgroups are bigger than others, primarily because a specific character or unit tends to have more fans than others. However, it was noted by a participant that there is a decrease in group sizes over the years, and fans find it harder to find individuals to consistently connect and "be mutuals" with. This may indicate a potential trend of selective interaction among *Enstarries*, but further studies can be made to explore this phenomenon.

From the point made above, it can be drawn that the *Enstarries* fandom does not conduct their activities one-dimensionally. There are conscious decisions made in their actions that draw towards preferences, but the same can be said with how their interactions are structured by some kind of unspoken norms or expectations, especially when faced with issues or conflict. On that note, *Enstarries* interactions can be described as bounded by principles of good conduct. Each member has the implicit role to keep the fandom a comfortable space for all *Enstarries* to enjoy their fan activities, regardless of one's preferences in characters or things to do. Good conduct, however, can be further linked to the broader principle of social responsibility, wherein one is expected to act for the benefit of the whole (in this case, the fandom). Once again taking as an example the scenario of depicted racism against the Ainu characters in the game, the rationale behind *Enstarries*' negative reactions can be comprehended as the fans consciously seeking social justice for the minority group being discriminated against. This can be understood as a form of fandom activism, [24], which shows an intersection of cultural and political participation; voicing out these concerns is not merely "for show", but is reflective of their stance towards greater issues that exist beyond the media project in question.

One can see that there is potential for contention between the fandom and the media, or more particularly its developers, because the fandom is not shy to advocate for a certain stance. Regardless, it must be understood that the *Enstars* fandom's efforts can only go so far, because of a conflict of interest between them, the consumer, and the game company, as the producer. These developers, however, are a corporate entity first and foremost, and thus would prioritize decisions that would be most profitable. Many of their actions would allude to this, from the seemingly reserved and conservative decisions made by the company, to perceived hesitancy in demographic expansion. For the former, it can be said that *Hapiele* would rather implement hegemonic ideologies as a "safe" route to take; since they cater to many audiences, it would be difficult to pander to all demands of the consumers, as it would take more resources to not only gain their insights, but also to implement any necessary changes. For the latter, one can say that *Enstars* is actually an exemplary case within the *joseimuke* industry, as not all projects of the said genre have game servers dedicated for audiences outside of the Japanese community, given that game development is an expensive endeavor [25]. Companies do not want to risk catering to an additional community without any promise of profitability, so the existence of an English *Enstars* game truly attests to the fandom's influence as a remarkable organization of its own.

6.0 Conclusion

This study provides insights on the studies of fandoms by exploring *joseimuke* contexts, particularly that of the media project, *Ensemble Stars*, illustrating organizational logics unique to *Enstars* fans. Seen as an organic type of organization, fandoms generally have their own norms and practices that they adhere to, revolving around the media of their interests. These specificities of practices, roles, norms create unique organizational characteristics that sets one fandom apart from others. In the case of *Ensemble Stars*, its fandom on X is organized by means of recognizing member fans through their favorite characters and choice of activity that defines their roles, structured through interactions that heavily focus on the narrative and character elements of the media project. The common issues that arise in the fandom are perceived as potential disruptors of an organization that functions harmoniously, usually in the form of disagreements, or larger discourses of the media project's social and moral positionality that are systemically produced by greater structures and institutions. Overall, *Enstarries*' fandom activity creates real influence in shaping the media project, despite "simply" being fans that are typically perceived as consumers. While they may be simply conducting their activities out of love for the media project in question, their actions can be understood at a larger level, attesting to the capabilities that an organic organization such as a fandom can realize.

7.0 Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Studies

7.1 To stakeholders.

As this study reveals a glimpse of online fandom experience, members of the fandom themselves, as well as other stakeholders, can utilize the findings of the study to enhance activities and services.

First and foremost, fans themselves can be empowered by gaining a better understanding of their community and its practices, to create more concerted efforts for their shared motivations and create necessary changes for any observations that are found to be unwanted or unproductive to their experience. Additionally, the knowledge about the subculture that they are in and the norms, practices, and values deemed important, can be utilized at the individual level for one fan to better navigate their activities, experiences, and identities within a social setting.

On the other hand, stakeholders with control over various online platforms, including *X* and similar websites, can benefit from understanding fandom organizations and take such groups and their practices into consideration when implementing and/or optimizing features. Fandoms can be perceived as a valuable consumer demographic, given that the online modality is deemed necessary for mediation of media-centric fandom activities. On a similar note, game companies and their developers can gain significant insights from understanding the way fans—the consumers of their products—organize themselves and their everyday activities, including their demands and inclinations. Realizing how fans experience being an enjoyer of their media firsthand is crucial to choosing necessary decisions directly affecting the media that will be favorable to the community, such as story themes to prioritize, and types of characters and events to feature. Moreover, proper conduct of public relations (PR) becomes an additional consideration, realizing that fandoms have certain expectations not only for the media itself, but also to those who are involved in its creation.

7.2 For future studies

This paper reflects one of the many fandoms centered on *joseimuke*, or Japanese media in general, and thus presents such limitations in representing the greater population that celebrates the said subculture. For a wider and more dedicated study on *joseimuke* and Japanese media, future researchers can consider expanding the scope of the study to include fandoms of other media projects. Comparative cases can also be done to identify similarities and differences in culture and practices among fandoms within the same sphere, or among different types of media, i.e.: fandoms of Japanese anime versus that of Korean drama.

Moreover, as this study leans to an exploratory approach in discovering about the *Enstars* fandom as a whole, in-depth studies can be conducted, dedicated around the themes that emerged in this, such as (1) activism in fandom spaces and (2) fandom and the narrative, among others. Notably, some of these themes are already discussed in existing literature, but are hardly explored in Japanese media-centered fandoms, including anime, games, music, and more. With its growing popularity and reputation of Japanese media, there is value in extending the application of existing knowledge.

8.0 Researcher Positionality

I consider myself a fan of *joseimuke* franchises, being a fan of some specific media for almost seven years. Similarly, I actively engage in fandom activity of different media, both within the *joseimuke* genre and beyond, usually within the scope of Japanese media, conducting my fan activities and engaging with fellow fans primarily on the social media platform *X*. The specific circumstance that sparked my interest in the topic lies in my involvement in the international *Ride Kamens* fandom as one of its first members, with

myself being a founder and admin of a non-official Discord server dedicated primarily to global fans of the mobile game called *Ride Kamens*. Notably, I am not a fan of *Ensemble Stars*, but I am aware of certain basic information about media projects. There are also instances wherein I would consume *Enstars* content, albeit very casually through its alternative formats like the anime and songs, but I never played the game, the main format of the franchise. Thus, I can consider myself a relative outsider, given that my study is heavily contextualized to explore the specific experiences among *Enstarries*, as they would call themselves. Overall, the reputation of *Enstars* as arguably the most successful *joseimuke* franchise, partly attributed to its fandom, along with my own personal experience of fandom engagement, has led to the conduct of this study.

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