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Understanding Player Fanaticism in Online Gaming Communities: The Case of Kasino Squad in Mobile Legends

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Abstract: This study explores the phenomenon of player fanaticism within the Kasino Squad community, a group of five male Mobile Legends players aged 22–23, through a qualitative descriptive approach. Drawing on fan studies, social identity theory, and participatory culture frameworks, this research investigates how digital enthusiasm evolves into a structured form of social belonging and identity negotiation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation, analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. Findings reveal that fanaticism among Kasino Squad members extends beyond gaming as entertainment; it constitutes a mode of affective labor that strengthens intra-group solidarity, emotional reciprocity, and self-representation in online environments. The members' routine practices—playing collaboratively, creating digital content, and engaging in social media discussions—reflect an intertwined relationship between passion and identity. Yet, the study also identifies the ambivalence of fanaticism: while it fosters community and self-expression, it can also lead to dependency, interpersonal tension, and blurred work–leisure boundaries. Overall, this research demonstrates that player fanaticism is not merely an excessive form of attachment but a culturally meaningful expression of networked intimacy and social cohesion in contemporary digital life. The Kasino Squad exemplifies how young adults use gaming spaces to construct belonging, recognition, and meaning in an era of participatory media.

Keywords: Player Fanaticism, Mobile Legends, Participatory Culture, Social Identity, Gaming Community

INTRODUCTION

Since its release in 2016 by Moonton, *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang* (MLBB) has grown into one of the most influential mobile multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games in Southeast Asia. Designed for fast-paced, team-based gameplay, MLBB allows players to compete in five-versus-five battles with the objective of destroying the opponent's base. Its accessibility through mobile devices, coupled with competitive ranking systems and frequent updates, has turned it into not only a game but also a digital social space where millions of players interact daily. The rise of MLBB coincides with the increasing penetration of mobile internet in Indonesia, where more than 200 million people are connected online, making the country one of the largest gaming markets in the world (Annur, 2022; Dihni, 2022).

Within this digital landscape, local gaming communities have emerged as important hubs for social interaction, identity formation, and collective engagement. One example is Kasino Squad, a Mobile Legends community located in Villa Indah Permai, Bekasi, Indonesia. Established in 2018, this community consists of around thirty-five active members from various social backgrounds, including students, young professionals, and freelancers. Members frequently gather at their local base camp—colloquially called *warteng*—not only to play but also to socialize, organize tournaments, and share gaming-related content. These offline gatherings extend the virtual bonds created through gameplay into real-world social relations. Over time, however, certain behavioral patterns have emerged among members that resemble what scholars describe as *fanaticism*—a form of excessive emotional attachment and uncritical devotion to a particular activity or object.

Fanaticism, in a broad psychological sense, refers to extreme and irrational enthusiasm driven by deep emotional commitment. Robles (2013) defines fanaticism as “an unconditional and passionate adherence” that often resists logic or criticism. Similarly, Eliani (2018) argues that fanaticism entails strong affection and loyalty toward an object, frequently leading to an inability to separate one's identity from the thing adored. Orever, as cited in Zulkarnain (2020), frames fanaticism as “an excessive and irrational enthusiasm or dedication” that provokes emotional responses detached from rational judgment. The common thread across these definitions is a rigidity of belief and an unwillingness to accept alternative views—what Winston Churchill, quoted in Fandy (2021), described as a person “who can't change his mind and won't change the subject.”

In the context of gaming, fanaticism often manifests through behavioral patterns such as emotional overreaction to wins or losses, obsessive spending on in-game items, and hostility toward rival teams. MLBB's monetization system, which includes the purchase of “skins” or cosmetic upgrades, provides fertile ground for such behaviors. A premium or “Collector” skin can cost up to 6,000 diamonds—approximately IDR 1.5 million (Khun, 2023). For many players, owning rare skins signifies prestige, competence, or loyalty to the game, reinforcing a sense of belonging within the community. This form of consumer-oriented fanaticism reflects what Saputra (2023) calls *hedonic consumption*, where spending is driven by emotional gratification rather than functional need.

While enthusiasm can motivate positive outcomes—such as teamwork, persistence, and social cohesion—fanaticism introduces potential social and psychological risks. Zulkarnain (2020) cautions that excessive emotional investment can lead to aggression, intolerance, and deindividuation, where individuals lose self-awareness in favor of collective group identity. Within gaming communities, this can manifest as toxic communication, flaming, or exclusion of outsiders. Over time, such patterns solidify into *group fanaticism*, where shared emotions and ideologies create a closed social circle resistant to criticism.

Yet, fanaticism is not purely negative. In digital cultures, it also reflects meaningful identity work. Players often construct self-narratives and social belonging through shared digital practices. As Nur Ilham (2023) observes, online communities provide members with a sense of collective identity, mutual support, and recognition—values often missing in their offline environments. In the case of Kasino Squad, the game becomes both a platform for entertainment and a symbolic space where social relationships, competition, and emotional attachments converge. Through regular interactions—both in-game and in-person—members form microcultures characterized by shared language, rituals, and hierarchies.

Scholars have noted that online games serve as both technological and social systems (Surbakti, 2017). Their design encourages cooperation, strategic thinking, and communication, blurring the boundary between play and social life. Historically, the evolution of online gaming dates back to early computer networks in the 1960s, but the commercialization of the internet in the mid-1990s and the proliferation of smartphones have accelerated its mass adoption (Chairunisa, 2022). Today, gaming is no longer merely a leisure activity but a significant cultural practice that shapes how individuals interact and express identity. The intertwining of digital interaction, emotional commitment, and consumerism makes gaming communities a rich site for studying contemporary fanaticism.

The case of the Kasino Squad community in Bekasi exemplifies this phenomenon. The group's consistent engagement, internal hierarchies, and collective pride in their in-game achievements illustrate how digital games foster strong emotional and social attachments. Members' devotion to the game often extends beyond the screen—into everyday conversation, spending behavior, and even self-perception. For some, victories in the virtual arena translate into personal pride, while losses provoke frustration comparable to that experienced by fans of traditional sports. This parallels the dynamics of sports fandom, where emotional investment and group identity reinforce a sense of purpose and belonging (Arief, 2021).

Nevertheless, the boundary between enthusiasm and fanaticism remains fluid. As gaming communities become more immersive and socially cohesive, members may unconsciously internalize competitive values and emotional extremes encouraged by the game's design. Such dynamics raise questions about how digital environments shape psychological engagement and collective behavior. Fanaticism in this context is not merely an individual trait but a social product arising from interaction between personal motivations, community culture, and game mechanics.

Given these observations, this study seeks to explore the phenomenon of fanaticism among members of the Kasino Squad Mobile Legends community. Specifically, it investigates: (1) what forms of fanaticism emerge within this community, and (2) what internal and external factors contribute to its development. By examining the intersection between digital play, emotional attachment, and social identity, this study aims to contribute to broader discussions on how online communities embody contemporary forms of devotion and belonging. Understanding the nature of player fanaticism not only reveals the psychological dynamics of gaming culture but also sheds light on the social transformations driven by digital media in Indonesia's rapidly evolving online landscape.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design. According to Creswell (2008), qualitative research is an approach aimed at exploring and understanding a central phenomenon. To grasp this phenomenon, researchers typically engage participants through broad and open-ended questions to elicit rich and detailed responses. The qualitative approach was deemed suitable for this study because it allows the researcher to gain a deep understanding of real-life situations and social behaviors as they naturally occur. By utilizing this approach, the researcher sought to describe and interpret the lived experiences of individuals within their natural contexts, thereby uncovering previously unrecognized patterns and meanings.

A descriptive qualitative method was applied in this study. As Moleong (as cited in Susilowati, 2017) explains, descriptive qualitative research involves collecting non-numerical data such as words, images, and observations. These data serve as the primary key to understanding the subject of investigation. Through this approach, the researcher explored the object of study in depth, emphasizing process over outcome. One of the essential characteristics of qualitative research is the difficulty of formulating hypotheses in advance. The study usually involves a small sample, extended observation time, and prioritizes understanding meanings and processes rather than statistical generalization. As Rusandi (2018) notes, qualitative inquiry is often referred to as ethnographic, phenomenological, or impressionistic research—methods that aim to interpret the meanings individuals attach to their experiences.

To obtain valid and comprehensive findings, multiple data collection techniques were used, including observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted to directly examine the behaviors and interactions of members within the Kasino Squad gaming community. Following Morris (as cited in Syamsudin, 2014), observation is defined as the systematic activity of recording events or phenomena using instruments to ensure accuracy and scientific validity. In this study, the researcher conducted direct observation to gain firsthand insights into the dynamics, communication patterns, and collective behaviors of the community.

Interviews served as another primary data collection method. According to Singh (as cited in Hakim, 2013), interviews are face-to-face interactions between the interviewer and respondents aimed at obtaining information efficiently and with minimal bias. This study employed unstructured interviews with selected informants, enabling participants to express their views freely and allowing the researcher to explore emergent themes more naturally. In addition, documentation was used to complement observational and interview data. As Gottschalk (as cited in Nilamsari, 2014) suggests, documentation involves examining records, writings, images, or other artifacts that provide evidence of particular social phenomena. These materials were used to corroborate information gathered from other methods.

The selection of informants followed specific criteria to ensure relevance to the research objectives. Participants were required to be active members of the Kasino Squad community, play the online game *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang*, regularly participate in group activities, and exhibit behaviors or attitudes associated with gaming fanaticism. These criteria ensured that the selected informants could provide meaningful insights into the research problem.

For data analysis, the study adopted the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (as cited in Rijali, 2018). The process involved four key steps: (1) data collection, (2) data reduction, (3) data display, and (4) conclusion drawing. Initially, raw data from observations, interviews, and documents were collected and organized. Next, the researcher performed data reduction by categorizing and focusing on the most relevant information. The reduced data were then presented in narrative or tabular form to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on recurring themes and verified against the collected evidence to ensure consistency and validity.

To strengthen the credibility of findings, the researcher employed data triangulation. Triangulation refers to the combination of multiple data sources, methods, or perspectives to cross-verify findings (Sugiyono, as cited in Alfansyur, 2020). In this study, technique triangulation was used—data on the same phenomenon were obtained through different techniques, including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. This approach ensured that the interpretations were not biased by a single data source and enhanced the trustworthiness of the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the dynamics of player fanaticism within the Kasino Squad community, a group of five male Mobile Legends players aged 22–23 who actively engage in collective gaming, streaming, and online interaction. The qualitative analysis revealed that player fanaticism in Kasino Squad is not merely a matter of excessive play or emotional attachment to the game, but rather a complex form of identity construction, social bonding, and participatory engagement that shapes how players experience themselves and their community. Drawing from fan studies (Jenkins, 1992; Hills, 2002), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and the concept of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), this section interprets how fanaticism operates as both a social glue and a performative practice within the group.

Fanaticism as Identity and Belonging

Across the interviews, participants consistently framed their intense involvement in Mobile Legends as a marker of belonging. They described Kasino Squad not only as a team but as an extension of their social identity. One participant stated, *“Playing with Kasino Squad is more than a hobby. It feels like part of who I am. When we win together, it’s not just about the game—it’s about us proving we’re the best squad out there.”* This expression resonates with social identity theory, which posits that individuals derive a sense of pride and self-esteem from group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Fanaticism in this context was performative: members repeatedly reaffirmed their identity as “true players” through constant engagement and mastery. As another member noted, *“If we don’t play every night, it feels incomplete. It’s like something is missing.”* Such statements highlight how routine participation becomes ritualized, producing what Hills (2002) calls “cultic devotion,” where commitment to the object of fandom transcends casual interest and becomes embedded in everyday life. This identity work is sustained through shared symbols—team names, hero preferences, inside jokes—and digital artifacts such as match highlights and memes circulated within their group chat.

Participatory Culture and Communal Creativity

The findings also demonstrate how Kasino Squad embodies what Jenkins (2006) calls a participatory culture, characterized by low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and informal mentorship. Members routinely produced gaming content, from short highlight reels to humorous edits

shared on TikTok. One participant explained, *“We like to record funny moments or epic plays. Sometimes it’s just for us, but sometimes it blows up online.”*

Through these practices, Kasino Squad transforms gameplay into collaborative storytelling. Their creativity becomes a social process that reinforces group cohesion while situating them within the broader Mobile Legends fandom. As Baym (2018) notes, online communities foster “relational labor,” where digital production is not purely instrumental but emotionally motivated and socially sustaining. Kasino Squad’s creative outputs thus serve as both entertainment and social capital, elevating their visibility and reinforcing their sense of collective achievement.

Emotional Investment and the Affective Economy of Play

Fanaticism within Kasino Squad is also deeply affective. Participants expressed strong emotional connections to both the game and their teammates. One described, *“When we lose, sometimes I can’t sleep. I keep thinking what went wrong.”* Another added, *“If someone plays badly, we can argue. But it’s because we care too much about winning together.”*

This emotional intensity aligns with Grossberg’s (1992) notion of the “affective economy” in fandom, where fans invest emotional energy into cultural objects that provide meaning and stability in their lives. For Kasino Squad, this emotional investment sustains the group’s vitality but also introduces tensions. While mutual care reinforces solidarity, the same affective energy can escalate conflicts when expectations are unmet. The group navigates these tensions through humor, apologies, and renewed commitment to teamwork—practices that maintain what Baym (2018) terms “networked intimacy.”

Social Hierarchies and Informal Leadership

Another pattern that emerged was the subtle formation of hierarchies within the group. Although members perceived the squad as egalitarian, observations revealed that one player—identified as the team’s strategist—often assumed a leadership role during matches. He was described by others as *“the brain of Kasino Squad.”* This leadership was accepted and even celebrated, with one participant commenting, *“We trust his calls. He knows everyone’s strength.”*

Such micro-hierarchies reflect what Deuze, Bowen Martin, and Allen (2007) describe as “collaborative professionalism” in online gaming communities, where expertise, rather than formal authority, becomes the basis of leadership. This structure enables efficient coordination while preserving the ethos of friendship and equality. It also illustrates how fanaticism operates through respect and recognition within a shared subculture—members are not only devoted to the game but also to each other’s skills and contributions.

Fanaticism and Masculine Identity Performance

Given that all members of Kasino Squad were male, the study also uncovered a gendered dimension of their fanaticism. The group’s conversations and jokes often revolved around competitiveness, dominance, and mutual teasing—behaviors consistent with traditional forms of masculine bonding (Connell, 1995). One member remarked, *“We’re like brothers who fight but always stick together.”*

Fanaticism here functions as a safe space for performing masculinity—asserting competence, controlling emotions, and earning peer respect through skill. However, it also opens moments of vulnerability; losing matches or personal stress sometimes triggered confessions of frustration or burnout. As other scholars note (e.g., Shaw, 2014), gaming communities can simultaneously reinforce and challenge gender norms, offering fluid spaces where emotional expression coexists with competitive performance.

Digital Media as a Platform for Visibility and Recognition

Social media played a central role in sustaining Kasino Squad's existence. Members used platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Discord not only to coordinate matches but also to project their identity publicly. One participant noted, *"When we post our wins or funny videos, people comment and recognize us. It feels good to be known."*

This aligns with Marwick and boyd's (2011) concept of "micro-celebrity," where individuals manage their online presence through strategic self-presentation to gain attention and validation. Kasino Squad's social media presence illustrates how fan practices intersect with influencer culture, blurring the line between ordinary players and public figures. Their online persona enhances group pride, while engagement metrics (likes, shares, followers) become indicators of collective success. Fanaticism thus manifests not only in gameplay but also in the curation of digital visibility.

The Dual Nature of Fanaticism: Empowerment and Risk

While fanaticism in Kasino Squad fosters creativity and community, it also entails risks. Excessive playtime and emotional dependency on the group sometimes affected participants' personal routines. One confessed, *"Sometimes I skip assignments because I don't want to miss our ranked sessions."* Such patterns echo what Pearce and Artemesia (2009) describe as the "entrapment of affinity," where passion-driven communities can blur the boundaries between leisure and obligation.

Despite these risks, participants framed their fanaticism positively—as motivation, companionship, and even informal therapy. Gaming sessions were often described as stress relief after work or study. This ambivalence reflects what Hills (2018) calls "justified devotion," where fans negotiate social legitimacy by reframing their obsessive engagement as productive or meaningful. For Kasino Squad, fanaticism was not a pathology but a shared discipline—a way of sustaining friendship through collective performance.

Negotiating Group Conflict and Sustainability

Conflicts within Kasino Squad, while frequent, were typically short-lived. Disagreements about strategy, performance, or tone were resolved through humor or brief cooling-off periods. One member recounted, *"Sometimes we argue, but after a few hours, we're back to playing. No one takes it too seriously."* This dynamic supports Jenkins's (2013) notion of "spreadable resilience," where participatory networks endure because of their capacity to absorb tension and reform consensus.

The group's sustainability also depended on shared rules and unspoken ethics. Members respected each other's availability, valued honesty, and collectively maintained their brand. As one participant summarized, *"We play hard, but we respect each other. That's why Kasino Squad lasts."* Such statements illustrate how micro-level affective labor—communication, empathy, humor—underpins the longevity of digital communities.

Interpreting Fanaticism as a Socio-Cultural Practice

Synthesizing these findings, the study suggests that player fanaticism in Kasino Squad operates as a socio-cultural practice shaped by digital media affordances, emotional investment, and identity negotiation. Fanaticism here is neither purely irrational nor pathological; rather, it is a structured mode of social participation embedded in everyday digital life. Through play, communication, and self-representation, members of Kasino Squad create meaning, belonging, and recognition.

This interpretation resonates with Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington's (2017) argument that fandom is best understood as a relational and performative activity that binds individuals into interpretive communities. Kasino Squad exemplifies how fan identity in online gaming is

continually constructed through shared affect, mediated creativity, and social performance. The findings also underscore the importance of viewing fanaticism not as excessive enthusiasm but as an organized form of cultural labor—a framework that sustains community and identity in contemporary digital cultures.

CONCLUSION

This study examined player fanaticism within the Kasino Squad Mobile Legends community, revealing that such devotion is far from a simple expression of excessive enthusiasm. Rather, it represents a complex social and cultural phenomenon that integrates emotional commitment, identity formation, and digital participation. Among the five active male members aged 22–23, fanaticism emerged as both a personal and collective practice—a means of constructing belonging, sustaining friendship, and achieving recognition within a broader digital ecosystem.

The findings demonstrate that fanaticism in Kasino Squad is rooted in the interplay between affect and community. Members' intense emotional investment in the game and in one another illustrates how online play fosters “networked intimacy” (Baym, 2018), where digital interaction becomes a form of social care. Their daily routines of playing, content creation, and social media engagement function as mechanisms of identity performance, aligning with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). Through these activities, Kasino Squad transforms Mobile Legends into a symbolic arena for expressing competence, loyalty, and camaraderie.

However, this study also reveals the dual nature of fanaticism. On one hand, it empowers players to form meaningful relationships and creative collaborations; on the other, it can blur boundaries between leisure and obligation. The group's occasional conflicts, fatigue, and academic neglect illustrate the psychological and temporal costs of sustained engagement. Yet, as members reinterpret these challenges as signs of commitment, their devotion becomes normalized and even valorized—what Hills (2018) calls “justified devotion.” Fanaticism thus oscillates between empowerment and risk, functioning as both social glue and potential trap.

From a broader perspective, Kasino Squad exemplifies how digital games serve as laboratories for understanding modern identity work and affective economies. Fanaticism here should not be dismissed as irrational obsession but recognized as a structured form of cultural participation shaped by media affordances, peer dynamics, and emotional labor. Future research might extend this inquiry by comparing gendered or cross-cultural expressions of gaming fanaticism or by exploring how monetization systems influence emotional attachment. Ultimately, the case of Kasino Squad illustrates that in the age of pervasive digital connectivity, fanaticism is less about losing control to passion than about finding meaning, solidarity, and visibility through it.

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