



Selected Papers of Internet Research 15:
The 15th Annual Meeting of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Daegu, Korea, 22-24 October 2014

COLLABORATIVE CROWDING, A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF ADOLESCENT FAN CULTURES ON TWITTER

Adam Arvidsson
University of Milano

The study of celebrity and fandom is a well-established area of inquiry into the field of online popular culture. Adolescent use of social media in practicing fandom and celebrity have been explored in particular detail. Most of these studies have used small data sets and focused on identity construction and the inter-personal dynamics of celebrity and fandom. The result has been an image of online fandom as transpiring in deliberative publics where actions can be understood as rationally motivated- whether in terms of the instrumental rationality of the 'neoliberal' branded self, or in terms of the communicative rationality of the fan community.

In this study we have looked at the crowd dynamics of adolescent fandom by gathering a corpus of 110.000 tweets around the top ten trending teen-band tags on twitter during a week of May 2013. The result is an image of fan cultures as structured by cascades of imitation, with very little in terms of deliberation of information transfer. However, this dynamics differs from classic accounts of crowds in two ways. First, the directionality of crowding on twitter is given by the algorithmic affordances of the platform itself: this way crowd behavior becomes directed towards the purposeful pursuit of individual visibility (defined as number of RT and @) and, at the collective level of turning a hashtag into a trending topic. Second, individual actors are reflexively aware of the power of the crowd in achieving celebrity and trend and frequently appeal to it in their attempt to pursue these aims. This gives rise to a collaborative ethic whereby individual make affective appeals to the collective identity of the crowd in order to attract mobilize its potential for the purpose at hand.

Looking at fan-culture on twitter from the point of view of crowd dynamics provides new insights on the nature of value and value creation on social media platforms. First, this study points to what we call 'collaborative crowding' as a model for value creation. This modality is distinct from both traditional models of economic rationality and contemporary theories of peer-to-peer dynamics in that its primary motivation is located at the level of collective affect, rather than individual motivation. Second, this collaborative crowding comes with an embryonic ethical dimension that emphasizes the collective dimension of value creation and, along with it individual debts towards the collectivity. This suggests that social media platforms- even when they are used in the

Suggested Citation (APA): Arvidsson, A. (2014, October 22-24). *Collaborative crowding, a digital ethnography of adolescent fan cultures on twitter*. Paper presented at Internet Research 15: The 15th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Daegu, Korea: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

most banal and commercial way- cannot simply be reduced to the proponents of 'neoliberal' selfhood. Rather adolescent micro celebrities on twitter seem to be harbingers of a new kind of as yet un-theorized post-neoliberal frame of mind. We suggest that further research on this have implications for elaborating a more nuanced understanding of the forms ethics and solidarities that prevail in the New Social overall.