

COMMUNICATION PATTERNS OF VIRTUAL IDOL “PLAVE” AND FANS THROUGH THE YOUTUBE APPLICATION ON @PLAVE_OFFICIAL

Meliyana Wati Dewi^{1*}, Lia Oktoviani², Komalasari², Siti Khumayah³, Farida Nurfalah⁴

Universitas Swadaya Gunung Jati Cirebon, Indonesia¹²³⁴

e-mail: meliyanawd13@gmail.com^{1}, oktovianilia@gmail.com², malagam212@gmail.com³,
siti.khumayah@ugj.ac.id³, farida.nurfalah@ugj.ac.id⁴

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ABSTRACT

YouTube has become a platform that makes it easy for its users to exchange messages. On this platform, a new phenomenon has emerged regarding virtual streamers who use avatars to interact with viewers on their YouTube channels. This study uses a qualitative method with a netnographic approach that emphasizes direct observation with visual materials in collecting data and in-depth interviews with 2 informants. The researcher aims to formulate an interaction process that is woven from existing communication patterns, which will produce certain outcomes. The researcher made the virtual idol PLAVE the subject of the study and found that the interactions carried out by the virtual idol with his fans formed a communication pattern that encouraged the formation of a virtual community. In this community, there was finally an exchange of messages that influenced each other. Therefore, a strong sense of loyalty and emotional synchronization was formed between the virtual idol and his fans.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization provides a positive impetus for the advancement of technology and information. In the past, humans interacted face to face or wrote letters which took a lot of time; but gradually replaced by communication technology such as mobile phones, computers, the internet and social media (Siraj et al., 2021). It is undeniable that new media is one of the real evidences of the development of this communication technology. In general, new media is a form of media that is computational and relies on computers for redistribution. Some examples of real forms of new media are: computer animation, computer games, computer interfaces, interactive computer installations, websites, and cyberspace. The presence of this new media is what opens up the space for human life more widely and increasingly without limits, resulting in social media, one of which is YouTube. In general, videos uploaded by content creators on the YouTube platform include videos of daily activities to educational content that often has to show their faces in front of the camera (Ma'rifatunnisaa & Adim, 2023). Other users can also freely interact with the content creators they follow through live streaming or the comments column. However, along with the development of technology, a new phenomenon has emerged known as Virtual Idol and Virtual Streamer. Where they prefer to use avatars with the help of Virtual Reality (VR) technology and Motion Capture Suits and do not reveal their real identities in the videos or content they create.

Virtual idols have emerged more than 30 years ago and this term is often used in various fields, such as games, advertising, and animation. The emergence of virtual idols began with the presence of Lynn Minmay in Japan in 1984. This virtual idol is depicted as a fictional singer in the animated series 'Super Dimension Fortress Macross' with the voice actor Mari Iijima and achieved considerable success at that time (Efendi et al., 2023). This success was followed by the emergence of other virtual idols, such

as Hatsune Miku who appeared in 2003 using the voice processing software, Vocaloid. The virtual idol in Vocaloid is not a human figure, but a three-dimensional (3D) hologram character in the form of animation and is depicted as a figure who is good at singing and dancing. This figure is claimed to be an idol produced digitally and is not a real idol who never gets tired and can move for a long time (Lin et al., 2021). This is in line with the statement of Hwang Tae-wook and Kim Jae-jung (2023) that virtual idols are included in the category of virtual singers, but there is no specific mention of the requirements and forms of the virtual idols studied.

Currently, PLAVE has become a popular virtual idol and streamer in South Korea and internationally. They also succeeded in becoming guest stars at a concert held at the Seoul World Cup Stadium which was watched by around 20,000 spectators. With a dark and empty stage, fans watched their actions through a large electronic screen and cheered using the cheers they had prepared in advance (fanchant) every time the group danced. In addition, their popularity also had an impact on the sales of the group's first mini album which was released on August 24 and has exceeded 200,000 units in the first week (Kim et al., 2023).

In many cases, the term virtual idol is described as a non-physical musician who publishes and performs original musical works with the help of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), or Augmented Reality (AR) technology supported by Motion Capture Suits devices. Virtual idols are categorized as technology-based activities related to the real world (Hwang & Kim, 2023). These activities are related to their interactions with fans through content in the form of live streaming or others through various digital platforms (social media). This refers to the transmission of video and audio content in real time (Godulla, 2022). Viewers can also interact with streamers through the comments column or give virtual gifts in the form of superchat (Kristiyono & Dwi Hermawan, 2023).

However, most of this research focuses on live streaming done by real humans in a retail context. Based on previous research, researchers know that live streaming done by virtual idols is different from real humans in two aspects. First, the visuals shown; viewers can more easily distinguish real human faces compared to avatars. In the context of virtual idols, viewers can only see computerized characters (avatars) that do not exist in the real world. Second, the type of content presented. In the retail context, streamers use screen-mediated sales presentations for various products and marketing communications. Here, viewers are persuaded to buy products introduced by the streamer (seller). In contrast, virtual idols are intended to entertain viewers through video game content, animation, or other forms of digital media content. Viewers can watch the content offered for free and are not required to make any purchases. However, the consumerist nature of the audience often appears when they appreciate the performances presented or want to engage in deeper interactions through the comments column and virtual gifts ("Mediated Interpersonal Communication," 2009).

Based on previous research, there are differences in the subjects used as research materials. This study aims to formulate a focus on the communication patterns and processes that exist between PLAVE and its fans (PLLI) through the YouTube channel @plave_official. The researchers try to examine the synchronization of emotions and fan loyalty through their interactions with virtual idols as an outcome produced in ongoing communication activities. The study's contribution lies in providing insights into how communication via social media channels like YouTube can influence emotional synchronization and loyalty among fans of virtual idols.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with a netnography approach, which is a research method that aims to gain an in-depth understanding of human and social problems (Onong Uchjana, 2019). In accordance with the problems studied, the researcher conducted observations and objectivity by adapting ethnographic research techniques using virtual observation to find communication patterns that occur between Virtual Idol "PLAVE" and PLLI (PLAVE fans) in the content on the YouTube channel @PLAVE_official.

The data collection technique used in this study refers to two main data sources, namely primary and secondary data. The primary (main) data source was obtained by researchers through: (1) direct observation of video content and live streaming on the YouTube channel @plave_official using a study of visual materials as evidenced by screenshots, and (2) the results of interviews conducted online with 2 PLAVE Indonesia admins and PLAVE TEAM INA on February 9-12, 2024. This was done by researchers as validation of the results of the observations made and to determine the effects of the communication

that occurred. Meanwhile, secondary data comes from books, journals, news articles, and the internet which are used as additional materials and data in the research being conducted.

RESULTS

Interaction Patterns on the @plave_official YouTube Channel

PLAVE YouTube channel was first created on June 16, 2022 and uploaded its first content on July 28, 2022 with a one-way communication pattern. The first content was a cover video of a song titled 2 O'clock by Dori performed by Yejun. Then on September 15, 2022, PLAVE did its first live streaming. In the broadcast, Yejun discussed his personal profile, trainee life (idol training period), and his experiences during his vacation. At that time, the number of viewers and comments received was not too massive. However, due to PLAVE's consistency in creating content and interacting with fans, there was a drastic increase in the number of viewers and comments received. PLAVE subscribers also continued to increase to have 557,000 subscribers (on 9 February 2024).

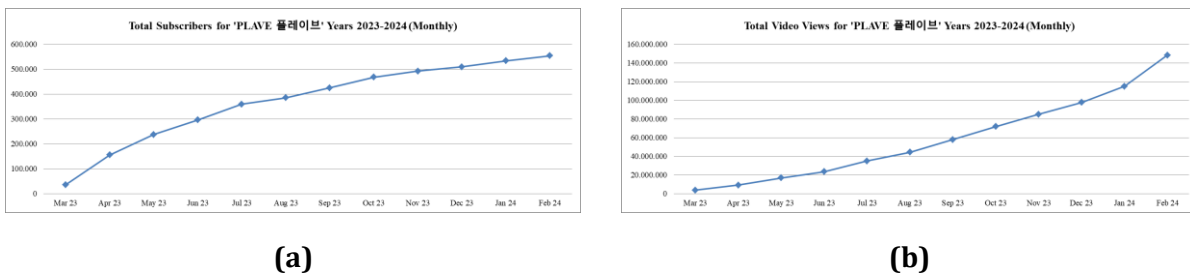


Figure 1. @plave_official YouTube Channel Data Graph 2023-2024. (a) Total Subscribers. (b) Total Viewers (Source: Researcher Data, 2024)

PLAVE YouTube channel has 12 playlists with various video content, including: PLAVE Official, PLAVE Live, PLAVE Highlight, PLAVE Cover, PLAVE Shorts, ASTERUM, 왜요 왜요 왜? (Why?), ASTERUM: The Shape of Things to Come, From. PLAVE, Merry PLListmas, PLAVE Behind, and ASTERUM: 134-1. When interacting with their fans through live streaming, they usually use various communication patterns. Generally, communication patterns are also interpreted as a model in the process of delivering messages (information).

One-Way Communication Pattern

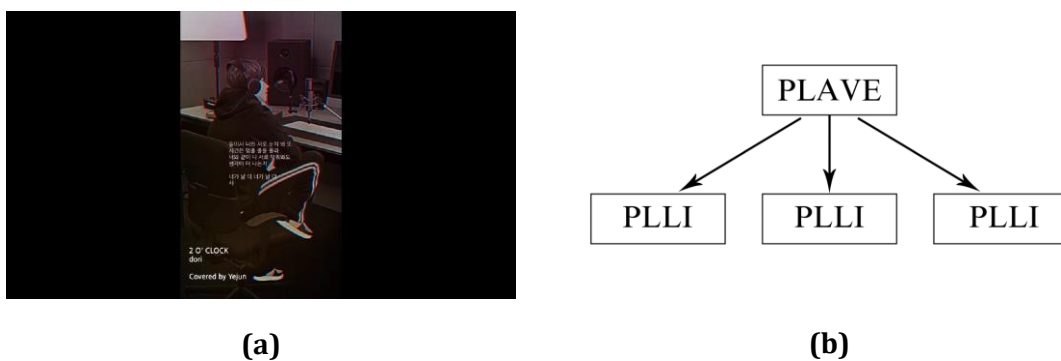


Figure 2. One-Way Communication Pattern. (a) Video Content '[COVER] 예준 - 2 O'CLOCK (원곡: dori) (Covered by Yejun)' ([COVER] YEJUN – 2 O'CLOCK (ORIGINAL SONG BY: dori) (Covered by Yejun)). (b) One-Way Communication Pattern Chart (Source: YouTube @plave_official, 2022)

The one-way communication pattern on the @plave_official YouTube channel can be found in video content containing song covers or dances as well as music videos, as seen in the playlists PLAVE Official, PLAVE Cover, and From. PLAVE; which do not use live streaming. In this content, there is a

process of delivering messages (information) without any feedback between the communicator and the communicant.

Two-Way Communication Pattern



Figure 3. Yejun and Fans' Interaction in Live Streaming '플레이브 공식 유죄인간 연습생 예준의 첫 번째 라이브 풀버전 ♡ | #플레이브 PLAVE | Yejun's 1st Live Full Ver.' (PLAVE Official Guilty Human Trainee Yejun's First Live ♡ | #PLAVE | Yejun's 1st Live Full)
 (Source: YouTube @plave_official, 2022)

In the live streaming broadcast on September 15, 2022, there was an active interaction between PLAVE members (Yejun) and their fans (PLLI). In the live streaming, Yejun told his story and personal profile, to the debut preparations carried out by PLAVE and included feedback from fans in the form of direct writing. In terms of the communication that was formed, the interaction that occurred can be categorized as a two-way communication pattern. This happens because there is a constant exchange of functions between the communicator (Yejun) and the communicant (viewers) in carrying out their functions. The communicator not only acts as a message giver (information), but also listens and vice versa with the communicant (viewers).

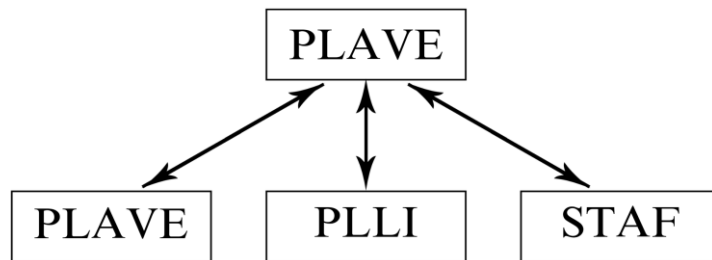


Figure 4. Two-Way Communication Pattern Chart
 (Source: Researcher Data, 2024)

Two-way communication is communication that occurs between two or more people in which there is an exchange of messages (information) and feedback or direct exchange of functions. On the YouTube channel @plave_official, this two-way communication has a very high intensity in the live streaming content they do.



Figure 5. Two-Way Communication Pattern in Live Streaming ‘**☹️**역술가가 분석한 **☹️**버추얼 아이들의 관상 **♥️♥️♥️♥️♥️** (**☹️** Analysis by A Fortune Teller **☹️** Virtual Idol’s Physiognomy **♥️♥️♥️♥️♥️**)’. (a) Between PLAVE members. (b) Between Members and Staff (Source: YouTube @plave_official, 2024)

Two-way communication is not only done by PLAVE members to their fans. This communication pattern also occurs in interactions between PLAVE members, between PLAVE members and staff, between fans, and between PLAVE members and fans (PLLI). As in the live streaming content ‘**☹️**역술가가 분석한 **☹️**버추얼 아이들의 관상 **♥️♥️♥️♥️♥️**’ (**☹️** Analysis by A Fortune Teller **☹️** Virtual Idol’s Physiognomy **♥️♥️♥️♥️♥️**). Two-way communication occurs between PLAVE members and the staff on duty. In this content, there is a very complex communication pattern. The communication that occurs is related to the context of physiognomy, where PLAVE members listen to the results of reading their character and destiny (future) through the science of reading faces.

Multi-directional Communication Patterns



Figure 6. Multi-directional Communication Patterns on the @plave_official YouTube Channel. (a) Between fans and PLAVE. (b) Multi-directional Communication Pattern Chart (Source: YouTube @plave_official, 2024)

Based on the results of interviews conducted with informants, we obtained information that there was a process of exchanging messages carried out through the comments column during the live streaming and on regular content (not live streaming) PLAVE. This proves that there is a change in roles in the communication that is carried out. The communicator (PLLI) does not only act as a listener, but also actively participates as a communicator in the ongoing communication.

"Yes! Apart from interacting with PLAVE, I also often chat with other PLLI. I usually chat about PLAVE of course or like the same topics that PLAVE does during live streaming. We also often chat using many platforms, so it's not limited to YouTube." (Informant 1, February 9, 2024)

Multi-directional or transactional communication not only involves dynamic interactions between communicators and their communicants, but also involves dynamic interactions between their communicants (Sujana, 2021). Indirectly, it can be said that the YouTube channel @plave_official is a liaison between fans in carrying out interactions and not only a liaison between idols and their fans.

Multi-dimensional Communication Patterns



Figure 7. Multi-dimensional Communication Patterns
(Source: YouTube @plave_official, 2024)

Based on the results of interviews with informants, researchers obtained information that there was a very active exchange of communication and created intimacy and closeness between PLAVE and PLLI.

"In addition to live streaming, PLAVE is always active in communicating with its fans and giving advice or encouragement. Like Yejun who encouraged PLLI for their exam period with Eunho also often covered songs to entertain us, so I personally feel close to them." (Informant 1, February 9, 2024)

The multi-dimensional communication that occurs on the @plave_official YouTube channel can be identified in the content dimension and the relationship dimension. This communication shows the unlimited process of encoding messages in the interactions carried out. The encoding of messages in both dimensions is influenced by emotions, so that there is a close relationship between the two.

Based on the interactions that occurred, researchers found that communication that occurred through the YouTube channel @plave_official had an interactive pattern. These patterns make it easier for communicators and their communicants to provide free feedback that is not limited by space and time. This is in accordance with the network of open communication patterns (star communication patterns) which are interpreted as a process of delivering messages that is free and provides satisfaction for communicators (Bharadwaj et al., 2022). In the star communication pattern, the source of the message does not only come from 1 (one) communicator. However, the communicator and communicant have the same position and can freely send messages directly (without going through an intermediary).

Communication Process on the YouTube Channel @plave_official

The communication process is the process of delivering messages by the communicator to the communicant, so that it can create a common meaning between them. In the communication process, there are usually eight components that are the main points, such as: communicator, encoding, message, media, noise, communicant, decoding, and response (feedback) (Arnus, 2015). On the YouTube channel @plave_official, the role of communicator is more dominantly held by the staff and members of PLAVE. The staff is tasked with compiling messages to be sent to the communicant (PLLI), while PLAVE members act as message senders. This can be seen in the notification of group activities by the staff such as: activity schedules, events or uploading photos and videos of content that has been prepared in advance; while PLAVE members act as the main communicators in live streaming and interact directly with the responses and feedback given by fans (PLLI).

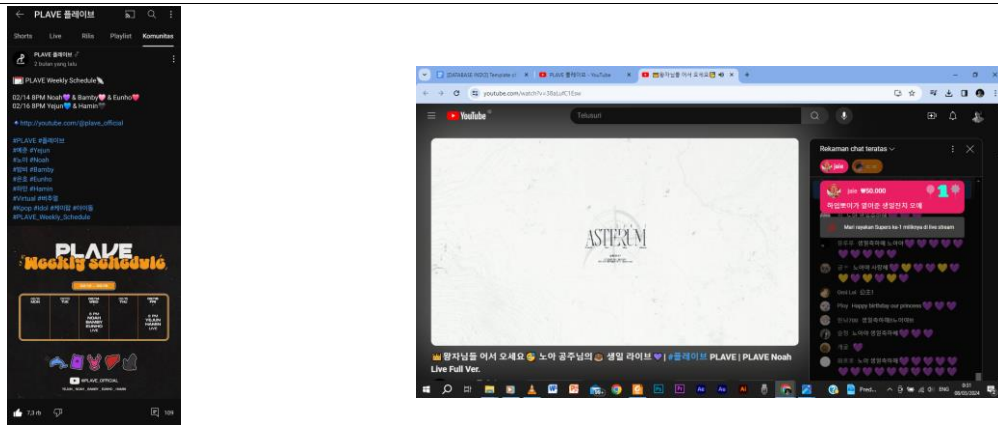


Figure 8. Communication Process on the @plave_official YouTube Channel. (a) Message Delivery Activities Carried Out by Staff. (b) Message Delivery Activities Carried Out by PLAVE Members
(Source: YouTube @plave_official, 2024)

In live streaming content, messages sent through the YouTube channel @plave_official are verbal and non-verbal in terms of gestures and facial expressions. This is found in movements, such as crossing arms which means disagreeing, stomping feet which means a sign of enthusiasm; and facial expressions, such as smiling, frowning, or laughing. In addition, there are usually emoticons (special characters) that appear around the face (around the head) when they are happy.



Figure 9. Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication on the YouTube Channel @plave_official
(Source: YouTube @plave_official, 2024)

Verbal and non-verbal communication carried out on the YouTube channel @plave_official, is carried out spontaneously, simultaneously, and non-sequentially with constant intensity making the communication activities carried out more interactive. However, in these communication activities, there are semantic barriers (language limitations) in the delivery of messages that take place and reduce the effectiveness of the messages they convey. This was acknowledged by informants who often had difficulty understanding the conversation or context being discussed by their idols.

"Live streaming is not too frequent, because there are also language limitations. I don't really understand Korean, so I often watch their song cover videos or wait for their clips that have been translated." (Informant 1, February 9, 2024)

In addition, based on the results of an interview conducted with informant 2 on February 12, 2024, fans also helped each other translate the live streaming carried out by PLAVE members using other social media platforms, such as Twitter (X).

"Language is honestly a barrier (in communication), but I don't really mind because there are already many PLLI who are translators on Twitter (X) and the auto-translate feature provided by the social media platform used by PLAVE." (Informant 2, February 12, 2024) PLAVE staff and members are aware of the differences in cultural and language backgrounds that hinder their interaction with fans, so they immediately uploaded an automatic translator after the live streaming ended. This makes it easier for fans to understand the message PLAVE wants to convey, and the live streaming content can also be watched repeatedly. In addition, this encourages positive responses and feedback from fans.

Fans are increasingly interested in interacting and providing feedback in the form of tips or purchasing official merchandise as proof of their support.

Based on the research results, the researcher found that the communication process that occurs between the virtual idol PLAVE and his fans (PLLI) is closely related to the theory of Computer Mediated Communication which influences a person's interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication or also called interpersonal communication is defined as the exchange of messages carried out by two or more people. However, with the development of technology (especially CMC communication technology), the use of the internet and social media has changed the nature of human interaction physically and psychologically into unreal and virtual meetings, so that they can share information without any limitations of space and time.

Outcomes Resulting from the Interactions That Occur

Social media has made it easier for fans to communicate constantly with their idols. Based on its characteristics, YouTube is a media that connects individuals with the same interests in forming a dynamic interaction. From the interactions that are built, the process of encoding messages occurs and produces knowledge, understanding, attention, and emotional feelings of fans about their idols (Aprilia et al., 2021). In live streaming broadcasts, viewers can interact with content creators directly and cause certain reactions (responses). This reaction is interpreted as a cognitive response to an object that is direct and temporary (Paramita et al., 2023).

Based on the interview results, the informants admitted that PLAVE's emotional presentation during live streaming greatly affected them psychologically, such as happy, joyful, impatient and other positive feelings. They also felt that there was synchronization (similarity) of emotions when watching live streaming content due to direct interaction that could enhance their emotional experience while watching. Given the real-time nature of live streaming, the emotions expressed by the streamer can be directly resonated with viewers simultaneously and at any time. "Yes, my mood is carried by them too. So if for example they laugh, even though I don't know the context of what they are talking about, I will still laugh. I often feel empty when their live is about to end and get really excited when their live is about to start. The point is, don't let anyone disturb you." (Informant 2, February 12, 2024)

The YouTube channel @plave_official has shown that objects on social media are a form of the true identity of idols who are seen by fans as real figures. Even more relevant because they exchange messages (information) all the time with direct feedback in live streaming. This encourages fans to learn more about their idols as individuals and not just in terms of fame or avatars. So psychologically, they feel compelled to continue to seek and enjoy the authenticity of their idols, thus fostering feelings of closeness and emotional attachment between fans and their idols. This is proven by the results of interviews conducted with informants as follows.

"In my opinion, PLAVE really has a positive influence on me compared to real human streamers. For example, after 2 months of joining PLLI, I got the opportunity to take part in free Korean language training in my city and was able to speak basic Korean and I also got the opportunity to perform dance in front of Korean students directly. So they really have a positive influence, especially motivation for me." (Informant 1, February 9, 2024)

The emotional involvement that occurs between virtual idols and their fans is similar to a parasocial relationship. The results of the study produced two factors that influence this emotional attachment, namely the pathological nature of fans and the intensity of communication carried out. In addition, these two factors also strengthen their relationship which is categorized as an unconditional positive regard relationship created from the freedom to express or show oneself (Lavrov et al., 2021).

Furthermore, researchers found that the pathological nature possessed by PLAVE (PLLI) fans is interpreted as the result of encoding stimuli from the atmosphere or information (messages) they get through a communication process. This encoding can be seen in their activities in watching live broadcasts, providing comments (feedback), and paying attention to their idols' movements to understand their idols' feelings (messages). PLAVE (PLLI) fans stated that they also use other social media platforms to interact with PLAVE, thus increasing the intensity of the communication carried out. This causes fans' identification with their idols to increase; and the higher the identification, the greater the emotional intensity produced due to exposure to the repetition of the communicated message (Young, 2020).

Based on the results of the study, emotional synchronicity can affect fan loyalty and purchasing power due to two factors. First, emotional synchronicity strengthens the relationship and sense of

belonging. The communication that occurs between fans (PLLI) and PLAVE consists of interaction patterns in which there is dynamic reciprocal behavior; both adjust to each other in providing responses that are also influenced by individual openness. This openness creates a sense of security and comfort for fans, thus fulfilling their emotional needs because they receive positive feedback.



Figure 10. Interaction via Superchat on Live Streaming ‘👑 왕자님들 어서 오세요 🥰 노아 공주님의 🍰 생일 라이브 💜 | #PlavePlave | PLAVE Noah Live Full Ver.

(👑 Welcome Princes 🥰 Princess Noah's 🍰 Birthday Live 💜 | #PLAVE | PLAVE Noah Live Full Ver.)
(Source: YouTube @plave_official, 2024)

Based on the results of interviews conducted with informants, researchers found that the emotional closeness that occurs encourages the consumerist nature (purchasing power) of fans. "Yes, I collect especially biases like Yejun and Hamin. The reason is because I feel happy when I see them and there is a sense of satisfaction in collecting them. Then the event is aimed at helping people (other PLLI) to give them appreciation and add to their experience too." (Informant 2, February 12, 2024)

The second factor is rooted in the Social Exchange Theory by Thibault and Kelley (Nurfalah et al., 2023). Which states that an individual often seeks balance in social interactions. When they receive a form of value from others (such as emotional support or comfort), they tend to be encouraged to provide a positive response in return (feedback) in order to maintain balance in the interactions that are established. This is in line with the information obtained from informants who said that they bought goods and created various special events (related to PLAVE) because they had received emotional motivation and support. The purchase of goods and events was carried out as a form of support and appreciation for PLAVE.

CONCLUSION

YouTube has transformed into an interactive medium for real-time message exchange, allowing users to collaborate with virtual idol 'PLAVE' and his fans. The channel's assessment shows high levels of interactive and efficient communication, surpassing other indicators like video performance, social media diversity, and viewer growth. The interactions on the @plave_official YouTube channel include one-way, two-way, multi-way, and multi-dimensional patterns, forming a complex virtual community. The effectiveness of these interactions is driven by verbal and non-verbal communication, which fans find interesting due to their emotional closeness.

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