

## Social interactivity and member roles in Digimon fandom group: a netnography study

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**How to Cite This Article:** Briandana, R., & Christanto, H. (2023). Social interactivity and member roles in Digimon fandom group: a netnography study. *Jurnal Studi Komunikasi*, 7(3). doi: 10.25139/jsk.v7i3.6230

Received: 15-04-2023, Revision: 13-10-2023, Acceptance: 19-10-2023, Published online: 30-11-2023

**Abstract** Digi-In stands as Indonesia's largest Digimon fan community, boasting the highest level of member participation and interaction through its Facebook group platform. This study investigates the dynamics of social interaction and the roles played by members within the Digi-In Facebook group, specifically in the Digimon Adventure 2020 animation context. The research framework draws upon the Sense of Community Theory and Groundswell Concept. Employing a constructivist paradigm, a descriptive qualitative approach, and the netnography method, this study relies on participant observation and interviews for data collection and Cyber Media Analysis for data analysis. The findings reveal that the Digi-In community fosters social interactivity among Digimon enthusiasts, facilitating the exchange of up-to-date information, promoting the trading of Digimon collectables, and enhancing members' photography and videography skills. The open communication within the Digi-In community provides opportunities for industry collaboration to boost customer engagement and allows animators to align their creative work with market demands.

**Keywords:** digi-in facebook group; digimon adventure 2020; member roles; netnography; social interactivity

### INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technology proliferation has given rise to various virtual communities (Luo et al., 2021). Among these virtual communities is Digi-In (Komunitas Digimon Indonesia), a Digimon fan community on Facebook with the largest membership and interactivity in Indonesia. According to Van Dijk and De Vos (2001), interactivity can be categorised into four dimensions: spatial (multilateral), temporal (synchronicity and time division), behavioural (controlling action), and mental (understanding action). As of August 28, 2021, Digi-In boasted an impressive membership count of 12,314, with 326 posts made in the past month. A preliminary survey conducted before this research indicated that over 53 per cent of members who actively posted and engaged with likes and comments in the Facebook group exhibited a high level of interactivity associated with Digi-In fandom (Christanto & Briandana, 2022).

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It is worth noting that the Digi-In Facebook group operates as a private community, where the group administrator must approve each post before it is published. Additionally, Digi-In maintains an Instagram account with the username @digi.in and a Twitter account under the username @digiin\_digimon. On Instagram, all posts are curated and uploaded by the Digi-In administrators, while on Facebook, community members can upload posts. However, the level of interaction, such as likes and comments, on Instagram is not as robust as observed in the Digi-In Facebook group. Furthermore, the Digi-In Twitter account has remained inactive, with no posts (tweets) since May 17, 2020. A summary of the interactivity data across these social media platforms is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Interactivity Across Digi-In Social Media Platforms

<b>Social Media</b>	<b>Post per Month</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Facebook	326	97%
Instagram	10	3%
Twitter	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Observation Findings (2022)

According to We Are Social and Hootsuite (2021), Facebook ranks second among mobile applications regarding active users, trailing only WhatsApp, and it stands as the second most downloaded application, following TikTok. Ganster and Schumacher (2009) assert that Facebook is an ideal tool for researching communities due to its ease of formation and management, as highlighted by (Nekmat and Lee, 2018).

The study of virtual communities in the digital age is garnering increasing attention from scholars and practitioners. This interest extends beyond communication studies to encompass various disciplines (Renqiang & Wende, 2022). Virtual communities emerge for specific reasons and benefit various stakeholders (Wachter et al., 2000).

A successful fandom is characterised by its ability to unite members in interactive and intimate experiences, with content quality being a pivotal factor in meeting members' needs and satisfaction (Wang, 2019). Some individuals join communities to avoid feelings of exclusion from their social circles, whether in the online or offline spheres (García-Álvarez et al., 2017). Additionally, personal identification and a sense of attachment to a brand influence one's participation in virtual communities, as exemplified by the case of the L'Oréal Paris Brazil fan page on Facebook (Lima et al., 2019).

Effective netnography research demands a virtual community that is relevant, active, interactive, substantial, diverse, and data-rich as its subject of study (Kozinets, 2010). Remarkably, no communication science research has been conducted in Indonesia that delves into the Digimon fan community or the Digimon franchise itself. Researchers are motivated to construct meaning by comprehending communication phenomena using the netnography method, particularly focusing on the

cultural interactivity surrounding Digimon Adventure 2020 and member roles within the Digi-In Facebook group, which epitomises the realm of computer-mediated communication (CMC).

CMC is intricately linked with communication technology and social interactions, as highlighted by Thurlow et al. (2004). Within the Digi-In Facebook group, CMC takes shape as members engage with each other by sharing various forms of content, such as text, photos, videos, or combinations. They provide feedback to one another through likes and comments on these posts.

The Sense of Community Theory, initially introduced by McMillan and Chavis (1986), comprises four pivotal factors: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connections. Sharing among members fosters a sense of belonging within the community. Membership is defined by certain boundaries, maintaining emotional safety, fostering sentiments, beliefs, and expectations, and a sense of acceptance and willingness to make sacrifices for the community. This sense of membership leads to self-identification as an integral part of the community, creating a profound sense of belonging and identification. It further encourages the emergence of a more meaningful and valuable membership through personal investment. It employs shared symbols to facilitate a collective understanding of the community through a common symbol system.

Diverse feelings among members drive discussions within the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Members are naturally drawn to communities where they perceive themselves as influential. A cohesive community can encourage its members to adapt to one another. The need for consensus among individuals and within the community creates pressure for conformity and uniformity. The influence of members on the community and the impact of the community on its members occur simultaneously, contributing to the complex dynamics of virtual communities.

In the context of integration and fulfilling needs, members' needs are satisfied through their participation in the community (Claffey & Brady, 2019). Factors such as membership status, the community's success, and the competencies of fellow members contribute to the community's strength and reinforcement (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Additionally, members who share common values are more likely to have similar needs, priorities, and goals, which motivates the community to address these needs (Nekmat & Lee, 2018).

Shared commitment and belief among community members encompass their stories, habits, time spent together, and shared experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Several crucial elements come into play in the realm of shared emotional connections. These include the frequency of interaction (contact hypothesis), the quality of positive relationship bonds (quality of interaction), coping together with challenges (closure to events), collective participation in events (shared valent event hypothesis), the community's historical context, and the

current status. It is worth noting that members who invest more time and energy into the community tend to be more emotionally involved. Additionally, the emotional impact of honour and humiliation on community members and the spiritual bond play a significant role in fostering a sense of connection (Dwityas et al., 2020).

Li and Bernoff (2008) delineate the Groundswell concept, which comprises various social technographic profile components to illustrate the potential for value creation and the roles of individuals in cyberspace, particularly in social media. These components include creators (active content creators in cyberspace), critics (those who provide comments, opinions, and judgments), collectors (individuals who gather information from the digital space), joiners (people who establish relationships with others), spectators (those who consume content such as reading blogs, websites, or watching videos), and inactive (individuals who do not actively contribute in cyberspace). Within the Digi-In Facebook group, social interactivity promotes the values of potential creation and sharing among members of the fandom, as evident in the social technographic profile related to the Digimon Adventure 2020 animation.

Prior research in the field of communication has not explored Digimon fan communities or topics related to Digimon in Indonesia. Additionally, no prior studies have employed netnography methods to investigate the Digimon animation fandom specifically. This makes it an intriguing subject for netnography research, with a specific emphasis on examining cultural interactions and the roles undertaken by members within the Indonesian Digimon fan community.

Given the research focus outlined above, this study aims to accomplish the following objectives: 1) Analyse the cultural interactions among members of the Digimon Adventure 2020 animation fandom within the Digi-In Facebook group; 2) Investigate the various roles played by members of the fandom within the Digi-In Facebook group concerning the Digimon Adventure 2020 animation. By addressing these objectives, this study seeks to provide insights into the complex dynamics of this online community and shed light on the multifaceted roles assumed by its members in the context of their shared enthusiasm for Digimon Adventure 2020.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research adopts a constructivist paradigm, which posits that the understanding of reality is relative and involves a process of interpreting communication phenomena. Employing a qualitative approach, this study aligns with Denzin and Lincoln's (2013) assertion that qualitative research investigates communication phenomena in natural settings (Griffin et al., 2019).

The research methodology employed in this study is netnography, which adapts ethnographic research methods to explore culture and community within computer-mediated communication contexts

(Kozinets, 2002). Netnography primarily focuses on research within virtual communities, reflecting the dynamics of networked societies. This method necessitates active researcher participation within the observed virtual community (Kozinets, 2010).

Data collection in this study encompasses participant observation and interviews, forming the foundation of a blended netnography research approach. Participant observation involves researchers actively participating as members of the Digi-In fandom, enabling them to gather field notes and analyse digital records within the Digi-In Facebook group. Additionally, interviews were conducted with five informants who demonstrated active engagement with the Digimon Adventure 2020 animation discussion within the Digi-In Facebook group during the research period, representing diverse backgrounds.

In this study, data analysis employs the netnography method (Kozinets, 2010). This method encompasses several stages: coding, note-taking, abstracting, checking and refinement, generalising, and theorising. This study employs a source triangulation technique involving two Digi-In Facebook group administrators to ensure data validity and reliability.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

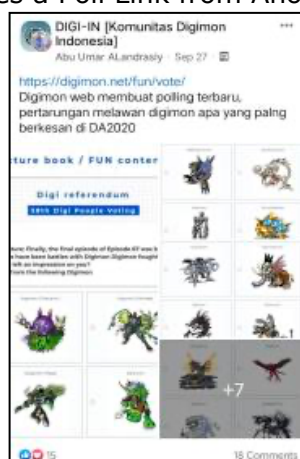
The results are presented below, employing the Cyber Media Analysis method (Nasrullah, 2020). The first finding pertains to the level of media engagement. The Digi-In Facebook group was established in 2011 as a private group with the primary objective of preventing the influx of fake accounts that might otherwise post unrelated content or comments outside the realm of Digimon topics. The private group setting fosters interactive communication between group administrators and their members, especially among Digi-In enthusiasts. Administrators frequently engage with members in the comment section when the topic aligns with their preferences. Notably, members did not utilise the tag (mention) and poll features within the Digi-In Facebook group during discussions of episodes 50 to 67 of Digimon Adventure 2020. This lack of usage can be attributed to these two features typically employed in Facebook Stories. In Facebook groups, tags automatically appear when commenting on posts, and polls are not conductible by fandom members, except for specific instances such as before the initial airing of an anime series or when poll links originate from another Digimon website, as depicted in Figure 1.

Between the 50th and 67th episodes, 86 uploads were related to discussions concerning the Digimon Adventure 2020 animation. The posts garnered the highest number of likes at 109 likes per post, with the highest number of comments reaching 85 comments per post.

Regarding media archives, the regulations within the Digi-In Facebook group are straightforward, concise, robust, and unambiguous. This clarity gives members the confidence to post and comment without fear, facilitating natural and seamless interactions. The sole restriction

imposed is that discussions within the Digi-In Facebook group must revolve around Digimon topics, giving rise to various Digimon-related terms used in member interactions. Generally, Digi-In members are well-acquainted with these terms due to their ongoing interest in animated series and movies. However, not all members can instantly comprehend these terms when discussing. To bridge this gap, two commonly adopted methods are sharing definitions among members and searching for them online.

**Figure 1.** A Member Shares a Poll Link from Another Digimon Website



Source: Digi-In Facebook group (2022)

When delving into discussions concerning Digimon Adventure 2020 at the media object level, many opinions emerge from Digi-In members.

**Table 2.** Opinions within Digi-In Facebook Group

Posts Categories	Amount	Percentage
Weekly episode reviews	54	63%
Photos of action figures, mini-figures, statues, and card games	11	13%
Personal imaginations	2	2%
Physical form and attack of Digimon	6	7%
Fun facts	4	5%
Ending songs	3	3%
Sketches and two-dimensional photos	2	2%
Others (except the categories above)	4	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Observation Result (2022)

Table 2 illustrates that the most widely discussed topic within the Digi-In Facebook group is the weekly episode reviews of Digimon Adventure 2020, garnering 63% of the discussions. Fandom members perceive these reviews as offering unique perspectives, particularly regarding scene details they may have missed while watching individually. These reviews frequently involve comparisons between Digimon Adventure 2020 and the original 1999-2000 version of Digimon Adventure. Most Digimon Adventure 2020 enthusiasts concur that Toei Animation has centred the story primarily on two characters, Taichi and

his Digimon partner, Agumon. As a form of sarcasm towards Digimon Adventure, the term "Taichi-centric" or "Taichi Adventure" is frequently employed. The weekly episode reviews vividly reflect members' enthusiasm and unwavering dedication to watching Digimon Adventure 2020.

The category of experience stories delves into the diverse motivations and expectations of individuals desiring to join Digi-In. These motivations include building a friendship network with those who share the same hobby, staying updated with the latest Digimon news, and utilising the community to relax. Fandom members collectively experience and share the excitement of commemorating the 20th anniversary of Digimon, with Digimon Adventure 2020 leaving a lasting impact and imparting valuable lessons in teamwork, friendship, and determination to its fans.

The interactions among members within the Digi-In Facebook group extend beyond discussions and encourage them to engage in the acquisition and collection of various Digimon-related items such as action figures, mini-figures, statues, and Digivices (such as Tamagotchi). This interaction bridges Digimon Adventure 2020 with everyday reality (He et al., 2022). Moreover, these interactions have spurred members to enhance their photography skills, engage in sketching, and create video content, as depicted in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Members' Skills in Photography, Sketches Drawing, and Video Making



Source: Digi-In Facebook Group (2022)

There is a hopeful anticipation that gatherings will resume once the pandemic subsides, allowing Digi-In members to meet and engage in face-to-face communication with fellow enthusiasts. Within the Digi-In community, members consistently share posts and comments about their interests. Notably, parallels exist between the animated series and video games, particularly in the context of Digimon attacks. The phenomenon of Digimon Adventure 2020, which focuses on the characters Taichi and Agumon, appears to foster a sense of unity among fandom members, as evident in their engagement with weekly episode reviews.

Additionally, the relatively straightforward storyline of Digimon Adventure 2020 suggests that its target audience extends beyond the millennial generation (born between 1980 and 1995), who watched the



original version of Digimon Adventure in 1999-2000, also to encompass Generation Z (born in 1996 and beyond) who may not have experienced the original animation. This broadened target market aligns with Toei Animation's strategy to boost the sale of Digimon merchandise, as Digimon Adventure 2020 caters to millennials and Generation Z demographics.

### Social Interactivity

The Digi-In community is characterised by its diverse membership, encompassing individuals from various backgrounds, including differences in age, gender, location, occupation, and other demographic attributes. Motivations for joining Digi-In vary and include a desire to connect with new people who share similar interests and hobbies (Lima et al., 2019), a quest for the latest Digimon-related information (Gün and Şenol, 2019), a willingness to engage in sharing with fellow community members (Choi and Kim, 2019), seeking relaxation and stress relief (Carvalho & Fernandes, 2018), and obtaining recommendations for Digimon collectables such as action figures, mini-figures, and statues (Lizzo and Liechty, 2020). Additionally, the ownership of Digimon collectables, particularly figurines, often motivates individuals to enhance their photography skills to capture aesthetically pleasing images, as demonstrated in Figure 3. (Sauro, 2017).

**Figure 3.** A member's post showing Digimon Action Figures and Statues



Source: Digi-In Facebook Group (2022)

According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), community boundaries yield positive advantages for its members, anchoring them within the group and fostering a sense of belonging and identification. In the Digi-In community, shared hobbies forge strong bonds, resulting in group cohesion and conformity among members.

Numerous posts within the Digi-In Facebook group elicit open responses from members. Remarkably, comments on these posts are devoid of profanity, attacks, or impositions, indicating a harmonious and supportive environment within Digi-In aimed at creating emotional security (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Group administrators not only curate posts before publication but also engage directly with members



through likes and comments (Wang, 2019). When issues arise, the administrator team initiates discussions to arrive at solutions and intervenes proactively as mediators (Kieling et al., 2021). This approach strengthens the fandom by bridging any divide between administrators and members. Additionally, the sense of togetherness within the community fosters a positive atmosphere (Ahuja and Alavi, 2018).

Moreover, positive communication between administrators and members and among members themselves can enhance the quality of interactions within the Digi-In community (Srivastava et al., 2023). Simultaneously, the common symbol system (McMillan and Chavis, 1986) employed encompasses terms related to Digimon evolution stages, Digimon character names, Digimon symbols, Digimon attacks, clothing attributes, and the opening, mid-show, and closing soundtracks.

Presently, the most popular discussion topic among Digi-In members centres around Digimon Adventure 2020. Fandom members collectively share their excitement to express their thoughts and emotions (M. Li et al., 2021), aligning with the notion classified by McMillan and Chavis (1986) as a form of personal investment. This excitement is particularly evident in the weekly episode reviews of Digimon Adventure 2020. For many members, these reviews have become a regular part of their weekly routine, drawing the interest of other members and fostering discussions in line with the shared event hypothesis. Consequently, episode reviews boost interaction frequency within the Digi-In community and establish emotional connections among members, akin to a spiritual bond. Beyond sharing their enthusiasm through reviews, members also impart values to their peers, including teamwork, friendship, and resilience (Shin and Perdue, 2021).

Members readily embrace new information shared through posts, creating momentum for further discussions, a phenomenon deemed influential. Members are more inclined to adhere to community rules that are concise, transparent, and easily comprehensible, underscoring the effect of honour on community members.

The prevailing sentiment among the majority of members ranges from discussions about Toei Animation's perceived overemphasis on Taichi and Agumon in Digimon Adventure 2020, leading to the emergence of terms like "Taichi-centric" and "Taichi Adventure" to comparisons between Digimon Adventure 2020 and the original 1999-2000 version of Digimon Adventure. This enduring discourse remains a prevalent topic among Digi-In members throughout the animation series (Lever et al., 2021). These discussions encompass various aspects, including animated series, movies, figurines, Digivices, manga, two-dimensional artwork, and the latest video games, illustrating the ceaseless flow of up-to-date information and the vitality of the Digi-In community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) characterise this ongoing engagement as a form of member investment in the community.

## Member Roles

Interactivity enables members to seamlessly switch roles within the Digi-In community, transitioning from post uploaders to likers, commenters, profile visitors, and readers. This aligns with Li and Bernoff's (2008) social technographic profile framework. Members who actively contribute by uploading various content types such as episode reviews, animation soundtracks, photos of action figures, two-dimensional artwork, and interesting facts fall into the category of creators. Over the research period, 39 creators collectively shared 86 posts.

The second role encompasses the critics, individuals who engage by liking and commenting on posts (Li and Bernoff, 2008). Throughout the research period, 2,012 likes and 1,433 comments were recorded. Notably, no posts featured the tag and poll features, indicating the absence of collectors within the scope of this study.

Digi-In members do not feel compelled to frequently update their profile pictures or post new statuses on their Facebook pages. Instead, they signify their presence by actively uploading posts, giving likes, and leaving comments. This phenomenon underscores that those actively engaging within the Digi-In Facebook group are the ones who maintain their profiles.

On Facebook, the term "post reach," referring to the number of individuals who have viewed a post at least once, is commonly used (Barnhart, 2021; Briandana & Mohamad Saleh, 2022). Within this study, the highest post reach recorded was 4,000 per post, with an average range of 1,000 to 2,000 reaches per post. This suggests that approximately 8% to 16% of the 12,314 active Digimon Adventure 2020 fandom members within the Digi-In Facebook group primarily assumed the role of spectators.

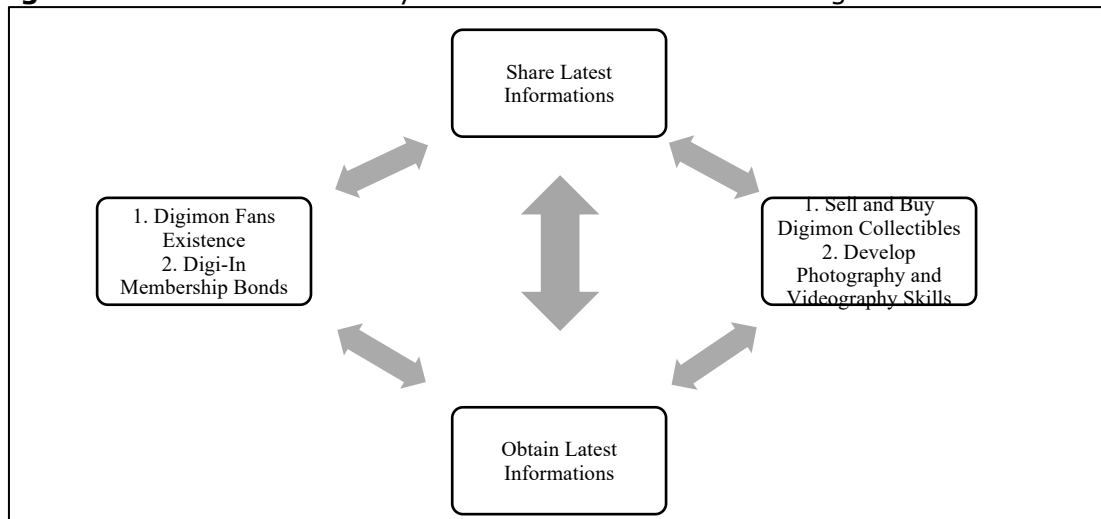
Additionally, some inactive members are part of the Digi-In community but do not engage in activities such as posting, liking, commenting, maintaining profiles, or reading posts. Reasons for this inactivity may include their daily routines, extended periods of Facebook or Digi-In group inactivity, or other personal factors.

The diverse roles within the Digi-In Facebook group also motivate members to actively participate in activities such as selling their Digimon-related collections within a dedicated group within the Digi-In community (Marketplace) or on e-commerce platforms. Some members are driven to enhance their photography skills to create more visually pleasing images. Others contribute by creating two-dimensional artwork, which may be hand-drawn or digital (Chong et al., 2018; Ho & Rajadurai, 2020). Moreover, several members channel their creativity into producing YouTube videos.

Digi-In is a valuable resource for enthusiasts interested in Digimon collectables, including action figures, mini-figures, statues, Digivices, card games, and video games. This phenomenon has been studied by Lizzo and Liechty (2020) within the Harry Potter fan community. The

ownership of Digimon collectables, especially action figures, motivates individuals to enhance their photography skills, aiming to achieve aesthetically pleasing results. This observation aligns with Sauro's (2017) research, which highlights the role of a community as a platform for literacy and skill development. It contrasts the findings of García-Álvarez et al. (2017), who noted that individuals are driven to join communities to avoid exclusion within their everyday environment. In the case of Digi-In, individuals initially engage in virtual communities and subsequently arrange face-to-face meetings.

**Figure 4.** Cultural Interactivity and Member Roles Model in Digi-In Facebook Group



Source: Research Result (2022)

From a theoretical perspective, this research can potentially contribute valuable insights to the field of digital communication, particularly within the domain of animation fandom. The study is anticipated to enrich qualitative analysis by employing netnography methods. It may be a reference for future research in related fields, especially communication science. Figure 4 illustrates the model depicting cultural interactivity and member roles within the Digi-In Facebook group. Moreover, this research has the potential to introduce the netnography method within the communication science field to a wider audience. It can serve as a means to broaden the reference base on fandom communities. This expansion extends beyond management and delves into the communication science perspective. Exploring social interactivity within these communities can be a captivating subject for future research, whether approached from a constructivist or critical paradigm.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusions derived from the analysis of the results and discussions in this study emphasise that cultural interactivity emerges from evolving communication behaviours within a group. Within the Digi-In community, every member can engage with any posted content. These

members seamlessly transition between roles, engage collectively, and find a facilitated platform in the Digi-In Facebook group. Members actively share and access the latest information related to Digimon. Toei Animation's Digimon Adventure 2020 animation, created to commemorate Digimon's 20th anniversary, captured significant attention from Digi-In members, fostering a profound sense of membership and emotional connection among them. Members' enthusiasm for the animation is manifested through activities such as composing weekly episode reviews, discussing Digimon's physical forms and attacks, and sharing photos of Digimon collectables featured in specific episodes. The exchange of various information among members stimulates the buying and selling of Digimon collectables and fosters the development of photography and videography skills among some members.

In the context of the Digimon Adventure 2020 discussions within the Digi-In Facebook group, members assume distinct roles. There are 39 creators actively contributing by creating posts. Critics play their role by accumulating 2,012 likes and 1,433 comments during the research period. However, no collectors utilised the tag and poll features on the posts. The presence of interaction within the Digi-In Facebook group contributes to the preservation of members' profiles and reinforces their sense of belonging (joiners). Typically, each post is viewed by only 8% to 16% of the total community members, categorising other members who infrequently access the Facebook application due to their daily routines or personal preferences as inactive members within the scope of this study. Despite not all members engaging actively in daily interactions within the Digi-In Facebook group, the enthusiasm surrounding the Digimon Adventure 2020 animation motivates some members to interact with one another and exchange roles, illustrating the concept of cultural interactivity.

Building on the insights derived from the results and discussions presented above, researchers recommend expanding the scope of research in communication science beyond the confines of Digimon Adventure 2020 episodes. In essence, there is a need to examine interactivity within other animation fandom cultures. These studies can adopt quantitative or qualitative approaches, employing diverse analytical methods. Additionally, further investigations could apply a critical paradigm to unveil the motivations of members who hold relatively negative opinions about Digimon and express them openly.

For the Digi-In community, it is imperative to maintain open lines of communication among its members. Collaboration between the distributor and reseller industry of action figures, mini-figures, statues, card games, and Digivices with the Digi-In community should be encouraged to enhance customer engagement. Animators should also consider market trends to craft storylines that are more pertinent to audiences of all ages, particularly in the context of rebooted versions of animations.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The researchers extend their gratitude to all the authors and colleagues whose work has been cited in this study. Additionally, the contributions of the Digi-In administrators and all the informants are greatly acknowledged for making this research possible.

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