

Consumerism on Clubhouse Exclusivity from Jean Baudrillard's Perspective

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Abstract

Clubhouse became increasingly popular since the beginning of 2021, especially in Indonesia. After being popularized by public figures who opened live discussions and chats through this audio-based platform, Clubhouse rose in popularity. However, not everyone can become a Clubhouse user, because this platform can only be downloaded by Apple devices and must be invited by users who already have a Clubhouse account. This requirement increases the demand for Clubhouse invitations. Some even sell these invitations online at varying prices. This paper attempts to examine the phenomenon of Clubhouse popularity using Jean Baudrillard's perspective. This descriptive qualitative approach analyzes Clubhouse's popularity using Jean Baudrillard's perspective about consumer society. The results of this study indicate that the consumer society conceived by Baudrillard is still relevant in dissecting the Clubhouse phenomenon. Its exclusivity makes the users use Clubhouse not because of the features offered, but based on the desire to be different from others by affirming their social class. Becoming a Clubhouse user means using Apple products and being part of the upper class by following the latest social media trends. This phenomenon illustrates that capitalism continues to work to create endless need under the guise of exclusivity to make its consumers feel special and different.

Keywords: Clubhouse; consumer society; public figures; Jean Baudrillard; social media

INTRODUCTION

Today, social media has become part of people's lives along with the development of information and communication technology (Akram & Kumar, 2017; Kapoor et al., 2018). As of January 2021, the most popular social media used by people worldwide is Facebook, with 2.7 billion active users (Statista, 2021). Talking about the variations of social media today is not an instant process, but it has gone through various eras in history since the emergence of the internet. In the past, we knew about Friendster, then followed by the presence of social networks such as YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, LinkedIn, Path, and Instagram with their respective superior features. Social media platforms like Facebook offer common features for sharing information with fellow users. Meanwhile, other social media sites such as YouTube, MySpace, Flickr, and Instagram focus on video and photo sharing features (Kietzmann et al., 2011). On the other hand, Twitter is a microblogging social media platform that allows users to send and read messages with a limited number of characters. The similarity of the features offered by various social media platforms is the interactivity between its users, where users are both producers and consumers of social media content (Amalia, 2019).

In Indonesia, the most used social media by people aged 16-64 years is YouTube, followed by WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook (Hootsuite & Social, 2021). The data released by globalwebindex.com through We Are Social and Hootsuite (2021) shows that internet users aged 16 to 64 years use the internet more to watch videos and vlogs (video blogs), listen to music through streaming services, and listen to podcasts.

The use of social media in society is a trend. Although Facebook has existed since 2004, Facebook became popular in Indonesia starting from 2008, followed by the emergence of Twitter in 2009 and the popularity of Instagram in 2012. In 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, TikTok was the most popular social media application widely downloaded throughout 2020 in Indonesia (Hootsuite & Social, 2021). Unlike the data from previous years, where the most downloaded social media application in Indonesia is Facebook (Hootsuite & Social, 2019, 2020). This shows that there is a trend in the use of social media, where users can choose to use social media according to their needs.

Clubhouse, an audio-based platform, suddenly rose in popularity among the public in early 2021. "*On Clubhouse tonight at 10 pm LA time*"; that is Elon Musk's tweet from his Twitter account on January 31, 2021. That tweet from the CEO of Tesla and SpaceX has made Clubhouse popular and increased its users from 600,000 users in December 2020 to 10 million users in February 2021 (Dean, 2021). Clubhouse itself is an audio-based social media platform that allows users to listen to live conversations, interviews, and discussions from exciting and famous people on various topics (Touma, 2021). Besides just listening, fellow Clubhouse users can also open chat topics, share stories, collaborate, and discuss.

When opening the application, the user will be presented with a list of chat rooms that we can enter. We can also create our own chat room. Each room has different topics, where the chat rooms are often created by experts or pioneers in their respective fields (O'Connor, 2021). The topics in Clubhouse rooms are very diverse, ranging from hobbies, politics, technology, art, business, gender, and even religious issues. There is no video or image on the platform, only text and sound.

The popularity of Clubhouse, especially in Indonesia, has also increased because several well-known people also use this audio-based social media platform. These famous people include film directors such as Joko Anwar and Ernest Prakarsa, and the founder of the startup company Tokopedia, William Tanuwijaya (Riyatno, 2021). Clubhouse users can listen to conversations according to the topic of the chat room and can even participate by taking part in live discussions.

One thing that is quite interesting about the popularity of Clubhouse is its exclusivity. Unlike other social media, where users can easily create an account and become a user, not everyone can join or become a Clubhouse user. Until April 2021, Clubhouse was only available on the iOS mobile operating system owned by Apple. This is because Clubhouse users were originally intended for the United States market, where most people use Apple devices compared to other brands of smartphone devices. Then, Apple device users cannot just download the Clubhouse application through the App Store and immediately create an account.

Applicants who do not have an account must be invited from other people who are already members and have a Clubhouse account. A person who already has a Clubhouse account can invite two friends to become a Clubhouse user. This exclusivity has made the platform so popular that invitations to become Clubhouse users have been sold on various online marketplaces (McGarrigle, 2021; Murdock, 2021). It means that public interest in this exclusive, popular platform is quite high.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The phenomenon of the Clubhouse trend and its exclusivity is relevant to the conception of object systems, signs, and consumerism by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. In fact, in this postmodern era, individuals in society tend to look for ways to continue differentiating themselves from other individuals. Baudrillard conceptualizes this phenomenon as a "desire" for individuals to differentiate themselves through the consumption of signs (Purwanti & Mas'ud, 2019).

Research examining the phenomenon using Jean Baudrillard's perspective, especially the studies of mass media and new media, mostly focuses on the conception of simulation, simulacra, and hyperreality (Alfitri & Musdalifah, 2019; Fitria, 2016; Srinawati et al., 2020). Several studies also use Jean Baudrillard's perspective regarding consumer society in consuming objects, such as Starbucks Coffee consumption in urban communities (Prisyliya, 2020).

Meanwhile, this study will focus on Jean Baudrillard's conception of consumer society, signs, and their relation to the Clubhouse phenomenon last February 2021 in Indonesia. Indeed, there are not many references or studies regarding Clubhouse considering that this social media platform has just become popular in February 2021, especially in Indonesia. Therefore, this article will fill the empty space in the academic realm by analyzing Clubhouse and its exclusivity based on Jean Baudrillard's perspective, especially regarding the sign system, consumerism, and the desire of communities to differentiate themselves from others through sign plays in consumption practices.

MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

This research is a theoretical study of the philosopher Jean Baudrillard with a qualitative descriptive method to describe and analyze the phenomenon of the popularity of Clubhouse social media and the exclusivity that it brings.

This study uses a literature review with data collection from journal articles, books, and previous studies. According to Tanfield (in Snyder, 2019), this literature review method can provide answers to studies that aim to evaluate theories and draw conclusions at the meta-level to form a theoretical framework.

In the first stage, the author will describe a phenomenon that occurs in society. In this case, the phenomenon of the clubhouse's popularity in society. Then in the second stage, Jean Baudrillard's conception of a consumer society will be described, which will be used in analyzing the Clubhouse phenomenon. In the final stage, the phenomena and thoughts of Jean Baudrillard will be critically linked and analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Clubhouse and the Exclusivity of Its Users

Clubhouse is an audio-based iPhone application launched by Paul Davison and Rohan Seth in April 2020. Clubhouse's global popularity, including in Indonesia, has increased since the platform was mentioned by the founder of Tesla, Elon Musk, via his Twitter account at the end of January 2021 (Stevenson, 2021). Since then, Clubhouse users have grown rapidly to more than 10 million users.

Like other social media platforms, Clubhouse has features that its users can use to communicate with one another. This audio-based platform allows its users to enter and explore various chat topics, from sharing stories, asking questions, discussing, and debating. When users open the Clubhouse application, users are presented with the main feature in "rooms" or chat rooms, where users can communicate via voice. Users can directly select chat topics of interest (Figure 1). The more interesting information the user provides to the Clubhouse application, the more chat rooms and individuals the application recommends joining (Touma, 2021).

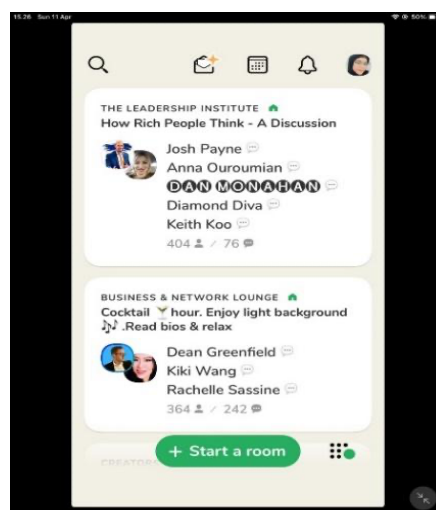


Figure 1. Front view when entering the Clubhouse application
Source: Researcher's Document, 2021

When a Clubhouse user creates a room, the room creator automatically becomes a "moderator" who has the right to invite other people into the chat room, mute the user in the chat room, or even exclude the user from the chat room. Meanwhile, when a Clubhouse user joins a room, he/she automatically becomes a "listener" and cannot join the live discussion unless allowed by the moderator (Figure 2). Clubhouse users can maximize these features to chat directly about exciting topics from around the world.

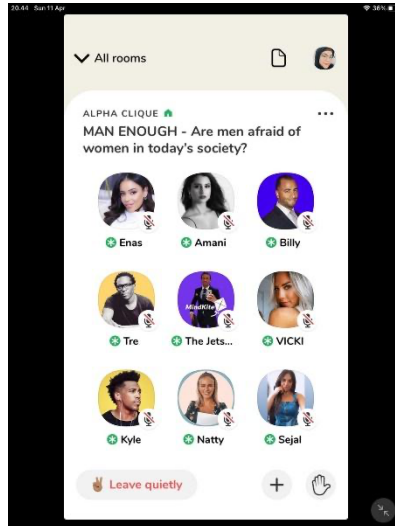


Figure 2. Display when entering the Clubhouse chat room
Source: Researcher's Document, 2021

As mentioned earlier, Clubhouse's social media platform is famous for its exclusivity. Until mid-April 2021, Clubhouse can only be downloaded on the iOS mobile operating system owned by Apple devices. Besides, a Clubhouse account can only be owned if we are invited by another person who is already a Clubhouse user. To join the Clubhouse, users who already have an account must send an invitation from their Clubhouse application, giving potential users access to create an account. Users who have been invited will be provided with a link to set up account creation. However, users who already have a Clubhouse account cannot freely invite other people to join because Clubhouse users have only two invitations to give to others who are not yet users. The number of invitations can be increased depending on the user's activity level in the Clubhouse.

Even though the invitation to become a Clubhouse user is free, the high demand for this invitation is used by some individuals to get the maximum possible benefit. Clubhouse invitations are sold through various online buying and selling platforms, such as Reddit, eBay, Craigslist. Even several groups on Facebook sell Clubhouse invitations for anywhere from \$50 to \$125 (Khan, 2021). In Indonesia, various Clubhouse invitation offers are sold on several e-commerce sites, such as Tokopedia, Shopee, and Bukalapak, with a price range of IDR 200,000 to IDR 500,000 (Kumparan, 2021). This indicates the high demand to become Clubhouse users so that there are potential users who are willing to spend money to enter the platform.

Jean Baudrillard's Conception: Signs and Desires of the Consumer Society

Jean Baudrillard is a French philosopher who is famous for his simulacra and hyperreality concepts. Jean Baudrillard's conceptions are divided into two periods, namely the critical period and the simulation period. These two periods are based on Baudrillard's differences in content, style, and focus, reflected in his published writings. In his early works, Baudrillard was heavily influenced by Marxist thinking. It is reflected in his writings that focus on the phenomenon of consumption, needs, and changes in people's lives from modern to postmodern, or from the era of early capitalism (the era of production) to global capitalism (the post-industrial or reproductive era). Meanwhile, in the simulation period, the focus of Baudrillard's works is in the post-industrial era, where the order of human life has been filled with signs produced by simulations creating a new world called hyperreality.

Baudrillard's early work entitled *Le Système des objets* (The System of Objects) reflects the ideas of Roland Barthes, in which Baudrillard shows structural boundaries by distinguishing reality and

imaginary. Objects that previously have a function value experience a shift in meaning and value. According to Baudrillard, when an object is no longer associated with its function, it is "free" from its expressive function. We as humans use, dominate, and are dominated by object systems that contain signs, where these signs embedding in our daily lives (Kellner, 1989).

From these ideas about objects and signs, Baudrillard also conceptualizes consumption activities in society in his work entitled *La Société de Consommation* (The Consumer Society, 1998). Baudrillard introduced the concept of culture that occurred in the era of postmodern society, namely the culture of the consumer society. Humans are surrounded by endless needs for objects that can satisfy them. The understanding of consumption, in this case, is not an act of taking the use-value of goods, but there is an act of manipulation of signs. Therefore, when someone consumes something, it is necessary to pay attention to whether the person is consuming the use-value of the object's function or consuming the object's sign value. In this postmodern era, consumption is something that cannot be avoided, especially for urban communities.

Consumption has become the organization of the whole daily life of humans (Baudrillard, 1998). In fact, individuals do not necessarily need the objects that they consume. A system of needs is formed as a strength so that humans continue to be consumptive. Therefore, Baudrillard argues that what is important about an object is not just its use-value or function, but the signs attached to the object (Baudrillard, 1998). The stronger the sign attached to the object in relation to the symbols of the upper social class, the more valuable and desirable the object is. It indicates that the sign has become a production machine that makes objects more valuable.

Meanwhile, needs are no longer based on objects but on social meanings and a desire to be different from other individuals. Humans always want to be different from other humans by displaying their social class through the sign system they consume. So, if more people consume an object, the sign value on that object will be weaker. Individuals will continue to look for ways to be different and more exclusive than other individuals because consumption supports one's social class.

In the socio-political order, consumption acts as an ideology to build social relations (Haryatmoko, 2016). Fashion logic also plays a role in this consumption practice, suggesting that if individuals do not follow the latest trends, they will be left behind. The logic of this mode takes the individual into the flow to always consume without end. Through consumption, broader ideologies and structures can be broadcast and reified, supporting unequal power structures and prioritizing certain groups over other disadvantaged groups (Mahoney & Collins, 2020).

What is with the Clubhouse trend?

The emergence of the internet and social media has been changing almost all aspects of human life. Social media is a place for sharing information and education that is useful for users. The interactivity that is the hallmark of social media makes social media a complementary reference for mainstream media (Houston et al., 2015; Sulistyningtyas et al., 2020; Takahashi et al., 2015).

The various social media outlets offer variants of their respective superior features in order to make it easier for users to establish relationships and access information. However, the more diverse a social media platform is, the more likely it is that these digital media are segmented based on social, economic, and cultural domains for the people who use them. Besides, the trends in the use of social media keep changing, followed by the demographic development of Indonesian society increasingly supporting the segmentation of social media users. This difference is not only a matter of accessibilities to social media, but also includes the skills and culture of its users. Adopting the concept of the philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, Yates & Lockley (2018) call this segmentation of digital media use as "digital distinctions" in which digital technology has entrenched and marked social class differences. So, do not be surprised if each social media has the characteristics of segmented users from different social and economic classes.

Clubhouse, this audio-based social media platform, brings exclusivity to society so that the platform has gained popularity in a fairly short time. Clubhouse is not the first audio-based social media platform. Long before Clubhouse, there were many other audio-based platforms with similar features that were familiar to the public, such as Skype and Discord. Based on the similarity of functions and features on offer, Discord is the platform closest to Clubhouse. Discord users can easily have an account for free, and we can download the application on various devices, from smartphones, tablets, to

computers/laptops. Meanwhile, Clubhouse is exclusively available only on the iOS mobile operating system on Apple devices. Not only that, having a Clubhouse account also requires invitations from other people who are already becoming Clubhouse users. So why has only Clubhouse become popular in the community?

Based on Jean Baudrillard's ideas about the sign system, an object becomes more valuable when the object has become a sign. In today's world, consumerism has become a culture where humans are surrounded by the endless need for objects that can satisfy them. Likewise, when Clubhouse came into existence as a new social media platform in the community, it was also supported by the tweets from public figures who helped popularize this audio-based platform. This moment made the use of Clubhouse immediately trending as the "hottest social media of the moment." The invitation system implemented by Clubhouse for users who want to join is like creating a wall of exclusivity. Users who have not yet joined are filled with curiosity and want to see what lies on the wall of exclusivity before missing the sensation of the latest trends using this so-called exclusive social media. This phenomenon is also known as the concept of fear of missing out, popularly known by the acronym FOMO.

Andrew Przybylski defines FOMO as the fear that other people might get valuable experiences that we missed (Blair, 2017; Przybylski et al., 2013). It is characterized by a desire to stay connected and keep up with what other people are doing. In Baudrillard's perspective, this concept is referred to as fashion logic, where there are codes and signs in consumption practices related to modernity. As we have seen, many other audio-based social media offer similar features to Clubhouse. However, Clubhouse still rose in popularity even though it was not as easy to become a user as other social media. There are even people who are willing to buy invitations to become Clubhouse users at quite high prices. It shows that what users and potential social media users are looking for are not the features and benefits offered by Clubhouse, but the signs attached to the platform. The logic of fashion as conceived by Baudrillard also plays a role in this phenomenon of Clubhouse popularity. As if an individual does not follow the trend, he will be the people who are left behind. By becoming a Clubhouse user, individuals will be considered as different classes because they follow the trends. Not only that, using Clubhouse indicates that individual users of the platform are considered capable of buying Apple devices.

Consumption practice in this Clubhouse phenomenon is a structured code game. In Jean Baudrillard's perspective, there is no direct mass consumption. There is a reference group that communicates the signs attached to the object. In this Clubhouse phenomenon, a reference group is an elite group such as Elon Musk and well-known Indonesian public figures such as Joko Anwar, Ernest Prakarsa, and William Tanuwijaya, who broadcast live through Clubhouse. This reference group indirectly participates in popularizing this platform in the community, especially through social media outlets like Twitter and Instagram. After being communicated and popularized by the reference group, the society began to follow the trend to make themselves equal to the reference group because they were on the same platform, on Clubhouse.

This phenomenon makes using Clubhouse not based on the features and benefits offered. Clubhouse becomes a social media platform associated with social logic and the desire to be different and exclusive. The phenomenon indicates Clubhouse as a mere trend. If more people consume and use an object, the sign value of the object will become weaker. As more and more users manage to have Clubhouse accounts, the platform is no longer exclusive. This phenomenon is known as the "15 minutes of fame," inspired by a quote by the famous artist Andy Warhol. The term 15 minutes of fame describes very brief media publicity for celebrities, individuals, and phenomena. It is reflected in the phenomenon of the Clubhouse's popularity, which only happened in passing. Baudrillard (1998) states that there will always be new needs when the old needs have been met. After Clubhouse is full of users, the platform is no longer exclusive. Therefore, we will never know what other social media platforms will be trending and popular in the future.

As a critical discussion, we learn that this Clubhouse trend phenomenon is promoting capitalism. Using Clubhouse means using an Apple product and has been invited by other users who already have an account. Privilege and exclusivity as Clubhouse users cover the existence of a capitalist system that creates the consumer society. People are expected to consume continuously without knowing whether the object of consumption is useful or not. Of course, it is not questioned by Clubhouse users as consumers of social media and Apple products because there is a consumption system where they feel obliged to enjoy the object that has been purchased. Baudrillard (1998) states that consumers maximize

the principles of existence to get pleasure from the object consumed. In this case, users of Apple products maximize what they have to become the Clubhouse user because the platform is only available on Apple devices. Therefore, the individual fulfills these apparent desires and needs through consumption because consumption supports one's social class affirmation.

CONCLUSION

The consumer society always wants to show its existence by showing its identity through what it consumes. The presence of a Clubhouse with the exclusivity brought by this platform provides an opportunity for the consumer society to differentiate itself from other societies. Being a Clubhouse user is associated with signs that the individual is different, using Apple products and following the latest social media trends. It makes the use of Clubhouse not based on the features and benefits but based on a desire to be different from other people by affirming its social class. This phenomenon illustrates how capitalism continues to create endless needs, under the guise of exclusivity to make its users feel special and different.

This study indicates that the consumerist society conceptualized by Jean Baudrillard is still quite relevant in discussing current phenomena, primarily the phenomenon of Clubhouse popularity in Indonesian society. In essence, society today is still controlled by objects of consumption that continue to produce and reproduce needs. Theoretically, this study contributes to Jean Baudrillard's thinking about consumerist desires and society. It is hoped that further studies will be able to analyze this trending social media phenomenon more comprehensively by using a deeper perspective of Jean Baudrillard, especially regarding simulations, simulacra, and hyperreality. Baudrillard's conception about simulations, simulacra, and hyperreality can dissect the Clubhouse phenomenon and the activities performed by its users in the virtual space to show their existence.

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