

From Fans to Unofficial Translators: Exploring Thai Fan-Subtitle Creators in Japanese Drama in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Despite being praised by global fans and acclaimed on international stages, Japanese media are still constantly victims of copyright infringement, as most Japanese studios lack expertise in international distribution. Such problems led to the “Fan-Subtitle” movement, in which fans translate content and distribute it illegally on video-sharing platforms without the original creator’s approval. This study examined Thai Fan-subtitle creators of Japanese drama. The Grounded Theory was adopted to explore and comprehend the phenomenon of Fan-Subtitling. This study also involved stakeholders by conducting In-depth interviews with 10 Thai fan-subtitle creators and three official copyright holders to identify fan-subtitle creators’ opinions, and the studio’s challenges in overseas distribution. Initial findings revealed that 1) Fan-subtitling is a global phenomenon that emerged from latent demand, the significant trait is that fan-subtitling can be considered as “*Prosumption*”. 2) Comparing with past studies, the practice of Fan-subtitling is similar to the past decades, but more digitalized due to the technology advancement, and 3) Japanese studios encounter 4 major challenges in reaching global markets, including the cultural differences and resource limitations in working with platform providers. This study also discusses the implications of the fan-subtitle mechanism, whether it has the potential to develop into business practices, and its application to other industries to encourage Japanese creatives to export their works globally, and mitigate the damage from copyright infringement.

Keywords: fan-subtitle, Japanese drama, online streaming, prosumption

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Introduction

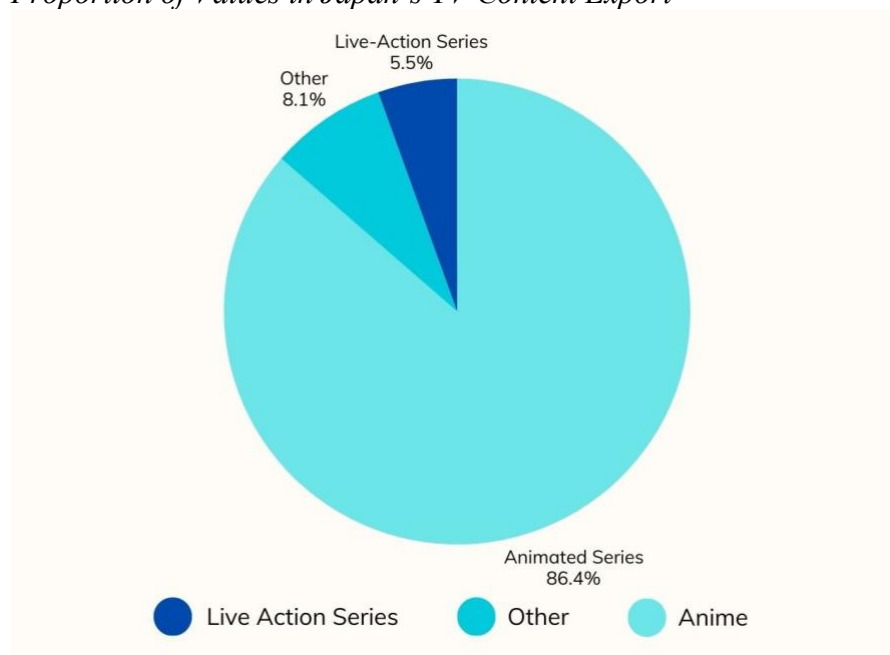
Japan is one of the countries with a prominent position in the entertainment industry. Monty (2010) defined Japan's creative works as "cultural software" export since they produced the media that captured fans' attention across the globe. Japanese creative works, such as Japanese-style comics (Manga), animated films (Anime), and dramas. These played a major role in driving Japan to success in developing Joseph Nye's "Soft Power", introduced as a tool to attract confidence on the global stage in diplomacy, economics, and politics without forcing or any forms of pressure (Pantumsinchai, 2012).

Since 2010, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) has launched the policy of Cool Japan Initiative, promoting Japan through cultural industries, such as martial arts, beverages like sake and tea, and Creative industries; J-pop music, manga, anime, and games, especially Japanese motion picture (Choo, 2015). As a result, the initiative has catapulted Japan to success in anime, while from 2020s Japan's motion pictures are constantly recognized by the audiences, starting from the 2022 Academy Awards' Best Foreign Language Film *Drive My Car* (2021), *One Piece* (2023), and highly acclaimed *Monster* (2023) on international stages, including *Kokuhō* (国宝) (2025), a film directed by a Korean-Japanese director, Lee Sang-il. The film earned \$8.26 million in 10 days and was selected to screen at the International Cannes Film Festival in May 2025, followed by the Shanghai International Film Festival (Schley, 2025).

Though it is widely recognized by critics and viewers, according to Fuyuhiko (2024), Japanese motion pictures are in the shadow of Anime and underperform. Japanese anime has dominated the market, accounting for \$421 million (86.4%), while film value is only \$23.3 million (5.5%; See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Proportion of Values in Japan's TV Content Export

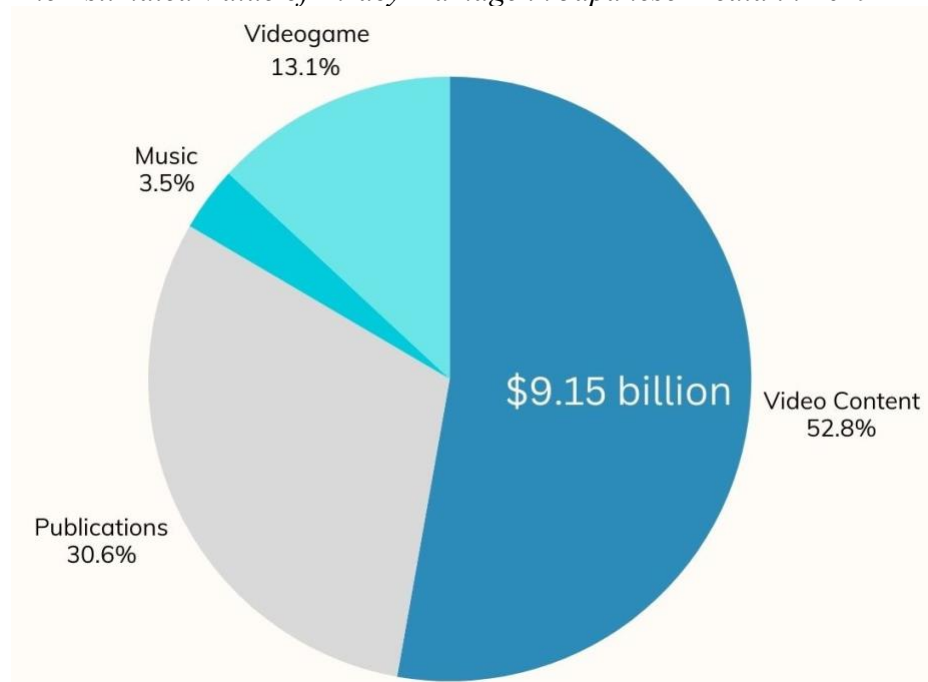


Japan's success comes with an unavoidable problem of copyright compliance. Japanese Creative workers are constantly victims of copyright infringement. From 2016 to 2018, the

scandalous Manga-mura (漫画村), the illegal online manga website, caused a total loss to the Japanese manga industry of approximately \$2.05 billion (¥320 billion) (Craig, 2020: 186). According to Figure 2, the Content Overseas Distribution Association (2023) estimated that copyright infringement damage in Japanese creative could reach \$14.1 billion in 2020, while video content, e.g., broadcasting, streaming subscription, DVDs, and cinema tickets, accounted for 53% (\$9.15 billion).

Figure 2

The Estimated Value of Piracy Damage in Japanese Media in 2019



Nevertheless, Japanese creative works are still struggling to reach international fans worldwide. Craved by international fans, *Godzilla -1.0* (ゴジラ-1.0) failed to achieve its full potential due to limited distribution channels in the global market. Frew (2024) reported that *Godzilla -1.0* has become the most pirated on torrent sites, as Toho Studios and Japanese creative workers still lack practices in global distribution, leading to the endorsement of the piracy movement.

Besides piracy issues, Japanese creative workers are constantly struggling. They are unaware of international fans waiting to witness their works. In 2022, despite receiving overwhelming acclaim from Japanese and international fans, Miku Ubukata, the writer of *Silent Drama*, responded that she did not appreciate her scripts being translated into other languages. Additionally, she emphasized that the drama *Silent* was meant to be broadcast only in Japan (Cloverblossoms, 2022; Daisuki JDrama Plus, 2022; Taylor, 2023). In response to Ubukata's comment, one of the pioneer Thai fan-subtitle pages replied that even though they are simply a fan-subtitle page, they also worked hard to pay due respect to originality by preserving every message in the show, and the Thai fan-subtitle creators also claimed they helped the studio promote the drama.

As explained above implied the gap between Japanese film industries and global audiences, along with Ubukata's controversial comment led author's attention to study the phenomenon of fan-subtitle movement as it represents several issues the problems of latent demand in the

international audiences, the advancement in technology that facilitating the new form of copyright infringement so-called “fan-subtitling”, and Japanese broadcaster’s challenges in distributing their works to global audiences.

Fan-subtitle groups need to be examined in several aspects: legal, linguistic, cultural, Media distribution, and business practices. This study has explored the related stakeholders: fan-subtitle creators and original creators to identify problems that are emerging from the fan-subtitle movement in Thailand, and the original creators’ viewpoint on the phenomenon.

What is Fan-Subtitle?

Subtitle was accounted as the practice of transcribing and translating the film’s dialogues (Cintas & Remael, 2021). It has to be synchronized with the film’s three major components: footage, dialogue, and subtitles themselves, making it an influential tool in dissolving barriers of languages and cultures, and above all, it facilitates access to the hearing impaired and vice versa (DeGuzman, 2023). Original copywriters generally create subtitles to ensure that they will convey to the audience.

Unlink the traditional subtitle that generally made by copyrighters, Condry (2010) has defined Fan-subtitle as “the practice of overseas fans digitalizing, translating, generating subtitles for Japanese-related media: animated films and television shows, and unauthorized upload online”, while a decade later, Leksuwat (2020) has a more concise definition as “subtitles created by fans for fans”.

History of Fan-Subtitles Movement

From the 1960s to the 2000s, mainstream Japanese Animated series (Anime) such as *Dragon Ball Z* and *Sailor Moon* were broadcast internationally. It was only offered in a voice-over (dubbing) version to the international fans. As a result, some fans opposed the idea of dubbing, failing to preserve the originality and cinematic experience (Romano, 2020).

Lupin III is presumed to be the earliest content that was fan-subtitled in 1975 in the United States by English-speaking American audiences (Leonard, 2005). While in Thailand, despite the record indicating when the fan-subtitle group emerged, it can be seen that Thai audiences are widely adopting foreign media through Social Networking Services (SNS).

Though fan-subtitles could be considered promoters that introduce content to new audiences, it is undeniable that they perform the fan-subtitling practice illegally, considering it as copyright infringement that needs to be discussed further.

As the history and context of fan-subtitles explained, what is fan-subtitling and how fan-subtitling originated, this research intends to identify the rationales behind the phenomenon of fan-subtitling. Fan-subtitling was performed by volunteer spirit and collaborative networks (Díaz-Cintas, 2018). However, the fan-subtitle movement emerged from the gap between broadcasters and global viewers as studios failed to distribute the media to the local audiences or the localized translations, leaving international audiences' demands unfulfilled. Massida (2020) illustrated that the practice of fan-subtitling is widely spread through several regions, and worldwide fans adopted the alternative of content consumption. However, Massida’s illustration still focused on Fan-subtitling in only non-English speaking countries (see Figure 3).

Figure 3*Landscape of Fan-Subtitle Movements Active (Massida, 2020)***Fansubbing around the world**

Barriers in International Distribution for Japanese Creative Workers

Although the Cool Japan Initiative aims to promote Japan's creative industries internationally, its success has been limited, and global demand for Japanese content remains unmet. Craig (2020) identified four major challenges that Japanese creators must address.

1. **Japan's population size of 127 million** is a sufficient market for Japanese creative workers to focus on the domestic market. Moreover, they are familiar with comprehending viewers' preferences, and there is no necessity to export their work for foreign audiences.
2. **Japan's homogenous social structure:** as Japan is an ethnostate that encounters low diversity issues, it leads Japanese creative workers to consider the domestic market rather than the international market. Fukao et al. (2006) discussed empirical evidence that Japanese corporations are lagging in localization. Transforming, translating, modifying, and localizing content to foreign markets causes more cost and burden to the organization. While some artists perceived that localizing their works could depreciate the aesthetic senses and originality.
3. **Lacking know-how in foreign markets:** As SMEs are the major that thrives Japan's economy, most Japanese businesses lack international business practices. Hence, resources in terms of finance and workforce are required to reach the global market.
4. **Worker's perception:** McGray (2002) explained that due to the culture of humbleness and complacency, Japanese artists perceived that craving for fame and success on the international stage.

Business Model of Fan-Subtitling

In the VDO streaming industry, businesses are driven by a subscription model. In other words, corporates provide goods or services to the end-users on a current basis, while end-users will pay the subscription fee. Such a method occurred in several industries, for example, e-commerce, software, and specifically streaming platforms (Lindstrom et al., 2023).

In the video streaming industry (as shown in Figure 2), the emergence of platform providers connected the studios and audiences worldwide. Starting from studios and production houses, these companies created content and broadcast the show through platforms. While audiences

apply for membership and pay subscription fees to the platforms, these subscriptions will be transferred to the studios as royalties, commissions, or license fees based on their contracts.

However, the value chain becomes more complicated after fan-subtitling disrupted the flow, for instance, though platforms facilitate legal channels for foreign language dramas, limitations in reaching content, or language barriers still exist. Eventually, fan-subtitle creators decided to take the fan-subtitle creator's role. Damage from this phenomenon needs to be investigated. Observing fan-subtitle pages, they received income through donations by posting the QR code of their account.

Figure 4

A Comparison of Business Models in Streaming Industries & Fan-Subtitle Group



Prosumer Economy

Due to the emergence of Web 2.0, which makes the internet more interactive, Ritzer & Jurgenson (2010) defined *Prosumption* as the activity that involves both “production” and “consumption” rather than either one (production) or the other (consumption). Instances of prosumption: Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and other SNS, allowing users to create blogs by uploading photos, videos, and text; or YouTube, where users can upload and share their videos. Additionally, these platforms allow users to connect and interact with others in online communities.

Ritzer & Jurgenson (2010) emphasized that *prosuming* must consist of 4 traits: emerging from 1) the new form of economy that 2) is driven by passion, 3) influences abundance, and 4) Disruption, as *prosumption* differs from traditional markets that stem from scarcity, and thrived by monetary returns, *Prosumers* are passionate about performing their roles voluntarily, or expecting only a handful of returns, causing the abundance in the market.

Literature Gaps

Past studies on fan-subtitle groups concentrated on linguistic aspects, especially the comparison of translation quality, while in legal aspects, the issues of fan-subtitles are highly related to fair use. Past literature leaves gaps in 3 areas that need to be covered:

- 1) **Population gap:** in the past study, English-, Spanish-, and Chinese-speaking fan-subtitle creators were widely explored as the market is scalable and its potential. For example, a study conducted by Díaz-Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez (2006) focused on English-speaking fan-subtitle creators, while Pérez-González (2007) conducted studies on the fan-subtitle creator group of Spanish-speakers, followed by Gao (2019)'s study that highlighted the Chinese fan-subtitle group.
- 2) **Conceptual gap:** Fan-subtitle, as defined by Condry (2010), and later by Leksuwat (2020), is narrow and vague, respectively. After digitalization, fan-subtitling is not limited to a specific country or media any longer. This study aims to extend the definition of fan-subtitles by examining whether the practice of fan-subtitling could be considered as another form of *Prosumption*, as Ritzer & Jurgenson (2010) defined.
- 3) **Knowledge gap:** Fan-subtitle phenomena are active around the world; the past literature has not examined in business and media distribution aspect. This study attempts to examine related stakeholders' opinions to holistically comprehend the fan-subtitling phenomenon.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the phenomenon of fan-subtitled Japanese drama in Thai markets and explore the impact that the fan-subtitle movement has had on the industry. The study will be conducted using a qualitative approach. The grounded theory will be adopted as this approach facilitates researchers to define the concept, develop a theory, and explore the phenomenon's insight. Corbin & Strauss (2015: 6), Creswell & Poth (2018: 82-88) additionally highlighted that Grounded Theory allows researchers to systematically scaffold a theory that explains the phenomenon, procedure, and issues. In this study, 10 Thai Fan-subtitle creators and 3 creative workers volunteered to participate in this study as follows:

Group I: Fan-Subtitle Creators

In this study, the Fan-subtitle creators are Thai, currently working in various industries. In terms of proficiency, Thai Fan-subtitle creators have been studying the Japanese language for 5 years or above, and 8 of 10 respondents possess the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) from N3 to N1, while the other two have never taken the proficiency test.

In terms of Japanese proficiency, only 2 of 10 respondents have never studied the Japanese language since they only understand a few words and have never taken formal study. While the other 8 respondents possess the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) from N3 and 4 of the respondents have been performing the role of fan—subtitle creators for a decade. Whereas the other started to run fan-subtitle pages around 2020, the respondents also claimed that they had decided to become a fan-subtitle creator during the pandemic of COVID-19 pandemic, as it significantly changed their media-consumption behavior. Though all of them perform fan-subtitling as a hobby, only 2 of the respondents are interested in working as professional subtitle creators in the future.

Group II: Official Copyrighters

For this group, the investigator managed to contact a respondent who is a film director, has been working in the motion industry for over 20 years, and is also currently serving at the

managing level, while the other 2 respondents in this group are workers from 2 different platform providers whose headquarters are based in China and Taiwan.

Conclusion

As literature was reviewed, and the interview was conducted, the initial findings can be concluded in 3 aspects as follows:

Can Fan-Subtitles Be Considered as *Prosuming*?

Fan-subtitle creators' response that they are voluntarily taking on the fan-subtitle creator's role because the Japanese drama in the Thai market is limited, with only a few dramas being distributed in Thai theaters and online platforms. Even fan-subtitle creators are aware that fan-subtitling is considered copyright infringement and illegal, but it is driven by passion and their preferences. Some respondents also revealed that on some occasions, they received a handful of donations from their followers, and they added that it does not matter, as they still want to do fan-subtitling as a hobby.

In this case, fan-subtitling is aligned with Ritzer & Jurgenson's definition of "*Prosumption*", the practice involving both "production" and "consumption" rather than either production or the other consumption, as the fan-subtitle creator has taken both roles as an audience who generates and distributes fan-made subtitles online.

Additionally, findings are also aligned with the 4 components of *Prosumption* as:

1. **New form of economy:** respondents highlighted that they voluntarily translate Japanese drama, despite doing it for free or for a handful of monetary returns.
2. **Driven by passion:** unlike professional subtitle creators, a fan-subtitle creator was driven by their passion and interests, willing to translate their preferred drama.
3. **Influencing abundance:** Unlike the traditional market that was founded on scarcity, fan-subtitling promotes abundance by breaking down the language barriers, promoting accessibility.
4. **Disruption:** Fan-subtitling also significantly transforms how viewers consume media, instead of consuming through the available official platform. Fan-subtitles led to a discussion of copyright compliance and criticism of official providers' backlogging and expertise in delivering their work on the global market.

Do Thai Fan-Subtitle Groups Have Any Differences From the Other Groups?

This study compared the findings with the Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez (2016), Pérez-González (2017), and Gao (2019) studies, which focused on English-, Spanish, and Chinese-speaking audiences, respectively. As the past studies have mainly concentrated on these markets due to their potential. This included the comparison of previous studies and this study.

According to Table 1, it can be summarized that fan-subtitle movement has been active over the period. It can be seen that the process of how fan-subtitle creator generate their fan-subbed content remained unchanged, while other factors were transformed over time.

Table 1
Result Comparison of Past Studies & Thai Fan-Subtitle Groups

Year	2006	2007	2019	2025
Author (s)	Cintas & Sánchez	González	Gao	This study
Groups	English- & Spanish-Speaking	English-Speaking	Chinese	Thai
Factor Influenced	- Web 2.0 - Globalization - Language	- globalization - Language barriers	- Censorship - State Intervention (Hu, 2014 & Jirattikorn, 2023)	- Underpromote - Limited Channels - Language Barriers
Genres	Japanese Anime	Japanese Anime	American Drama Korean, Japanese, Thai, etc.	Japanese Drama
Work Process	1. Download the Raw Video 2. Translation 3. Timing 4. Editing 5. Quality control 6. Encoding 7. Distribution	1. Download the Raw Video 2. Transcribe dialogue 3. Translate the subtitle 4. Timing 5. Quality Checking 6. Embedding Subtitles 7. Distributing	1. Download the Raw Video 2. Adjust the Timing 3. Translating 4. Proofreading 5. Special effects 6. Distributing	1. Selecting Contents 2. Downloading Files 3. Translating the Subtitles 4. Timing & Synchroniz Subtitles 5. Quality Checking 6. Embedding Subtitles 7. Uploading Videos
Platforms	- TV ripped - P2P Streaming - On-demand Download	- TV ripped - P2P Streaming	- P2P Streaming - Web 2.0 Video Sharing - On-demand Download	- P2P Streaming - Web 2.0 Video Sharing - On-demand Download - Cloud Storage

Due to globalization and Web 2.0, which influence fan-subtitle creators in the early stage, the fan-subtitle group, the causes that influence fan-subtitle movement nowadays are problems of under-promotion, censorship, limited channels, and language barriers. In addition, in the past, analog methods, especially TV-ripped, played a crucial role. In the past years, the fan-subtitling approach has become more digitalized, such as on-demand streaming, cloud storage, and AI dialogue transcribers. Lastly, early fan-subtitle groups are limited in Japanese anime, while years later, the genre is in wider ranges.

What are the Challenges for Japanese Creatives in Distributing Their Work?

This section will discuss the challenges of Japanese film workers and streaming platform providers.

Challenges of Japanese Film Producers

According to Craig (2020), Japanese creative workers are struggling to reach international markets due to 4 major reasons. However, after interviewing a Japanese film director, the director revealed this opinion that goes against Craig's conclusion:

1. **The population size:** Unlike most Japanese film producers, the respondent strongly believed that the size of Japan's market is not sufficient; he recognized the importance of the international market.

2. **Localization:** The respondent emphasized the importance of subtitles as a tool that dissolves the language barrier; however, subtitles must be handled by professional translators working closely with the original creators.
3. **Lack of know-how:** Though Craig concluded that most Japanese creative workers tend to lack expertise in the international market, the respondent has been working in the film industry for over 20 years, with experience in participating in international film festivals.
4. **Workers' attitude:** The respondent opened up to overseas markets; however, he commented that most of the younger filmmakers are still focusing on creating films, but not considering the distribution.

Challenges Between Film Producers and International Platform Providers

Even the video streaming industry has played a significant role in shaping media consumption. Globally, Japanese film creators are still struggling to reach the audience's demand, leaving the latent demand that eventually emerged in the fan-subtitle movement. Two major obstacles are:

1. **Cultural Differences:** Platform providers are aware of audiences' demand for Japanese drama, and intend to acquire a license as official distributors; however, respondents stated that one of the particular reasons that slows the process in Japanese film distribution is the differences in working culture. Respondents also referred to the term "Backlogging". For instance, to upload the drama and advertising materials, they have to wait for the approval process from the original copyrighter, and eventually, it passes the prime time in promoting.
2. **Minimum Guarantee:** The Japanese director also revealed that in the streaming industry, there is a concept of "Minimum Guarantee". Film directors will receive the royalties or commission based on views; the respondent had given an instance of "One yen per play" 「一再生一円」 and "Two yen if they watch longer than certain minutes" 「何分以上見てもらって2円」. As a result, to achieve the minimum guarantee, several resources such as budget and workforce in promoting are required.

Implications

Though the fan-subtitle movement has promoted accessibility by unofficially distributing the Japanese drama, it is undeniable that fan-subtitling also causes damage to original creators and the entire motion industry. The implications of this study will be discussed to develop plausible practices and mitigate the damage.

What Could Be the Business Practice for Fan-Subtitling

As the current business model of fan-subtitling is based on donation-based, the original has never received a return from such practice. However, 2 current platforms can balance the practice of fan-subtitle movement and copyright compliance:

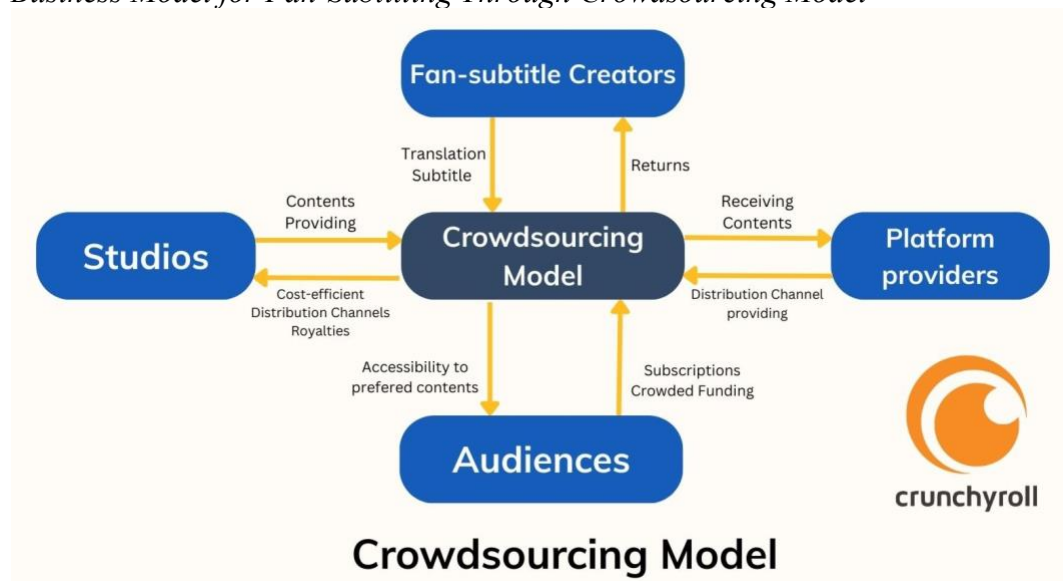
1. **Rakuten Viki:** founded in Singapore, later acquired by Rakuten, a Japanese company, Viki is a legal streaming platform, as it is a licensee that receives the distribution rights from Japanese studios, which allows viewers to deliver the fan-made English and other languages subtitles in promoting accessibility to other audiences. Fan-subtitle creator can maintain their role while promoting the legal consumption (Dwyer, 2020; Hwang, 2018).

2. **Crowdsourcing Model:** According to Bhatti et al. (2020), Crowdsourcing is one of the effective business models that facilitates business cost efficiency and open innovation, and scalable growth. Crowdsourcing is a user-oriented expertise as it developed from users' demand and customized to their needs (Goh et al. 2016) (see Figure 5).

Crunchyroll, a platform that was once a hub of pirated anime, has shifted its role from a pirated site to an official anime channel. Eventually, Crunchyroll has become one of the prominent anime distributors that encourages legal anime consumption (Blair, 2020).

Figure 5

Business Model for Fan-Subtitling Through Crowdsourcing Model



International Market Expertise of Official Distributor

Referred to the respondent from film sector, suggesting that younger film producers are thinking of producing the film, and overlook the important of distribution, along with Craig's conclusion that made in 2020, that Japanese creative workers are lacking know-how in distributing their work globally, to improve and extend their knowledge, the following are the recommendation for Japanese film producers and production houses:

1. **Establishing an exporting organization to foreign markets:** The fan-subtitle movement emerged as Japanese studios were constrained by resource and international distribution channels, leading to audiences having latent demand in consuming Japanese drama. Unlike large-sized or corporate studios that manage to export content internationally, Medium- and small-sized studios are recommended to form a body or organization to increase their capability in international exports. Additionally, experienced studios and producers could offer their know-how by being mentors and guiding young talents and small studios' pathways to perform their works in international film festivals and on global stages.
2. **Collaborating with potential partners:** As Fan-subtitle creator served significantly as prosumer who breaking down the barriers in languages and cultural differences, while Japanese film producers are struggled in localization and workforces' shortage, both fan-subtitle creators and filmmaker could collaborate and optimizing their specialty since fan-subtitle creator can provided their language proficiency skills, and

facilitated studios the distribution channels, allowing them to reach international audiences. In addition, the collaboration can strengthen copyright compliance and become a mechanism that relieves producers' concerns in preserving the aesthetic and cinematic experience of the film by working closely with fan-subtitle creators.

Applying Fan-Subtitling to Other Industries

Fan-subtitling is widely considered another form of copyright infringement. Apart from the motion picture industry, several sectors, such as music, publication, and other cultural exports, are also struggling with localization and workforce shortages. By transforming their prosumer role, fan-subtitle creators are assets to these industries as they can become professional translators, proofreaders who assist press companies and music studios in conveying the message to other audiences.

Recommendation

Based on the summary of this study, 2 major recommendations are proposed to guide future researchers to be more comprehensive in the phenomenon of Fan-subtitle movement:

Quantitative Studies are Required

Though fan-subtitle creators claimed that fan-subtitling is a practice that introduces the new content to new potential audiences, while studios and platform respondents claimed that the fan-subtitle groups caused an impact on the studio's confidence in exporting content, diminishing translators' wages, which eventually backfired entire film industry. This is still the study conducted by a grounded theory approach that is scaffolded by the response of informants. Further quantitative studies are necessary to extend to identification of the empirical evidence.

Apart from quantifying the impacts, the number of audiences who consume Japanese content via fan-subtitle pages in Thailand has never been examined. Surveying to determine whether audiences who consume Japanese drama through fan-sub channels are scalable and have the potential to become a major market for Japanese film producers and platform providers is highly recommended.

Different Population to Examine

Since the fan-subtitle movement is a global phenomenon that nowadays is not limited to a certain type of media, genre, and languages, this study only concentrated on Thai fan-subtitle groups in Japanese drama. Studying in different populations and samples is recommended to investigate, e.g., Bahasa-speaking translators on Japanese drama pages and Korean Fan-Subtitle communities.

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