

SOCIAL MEDIA AND MORAL PANIC: EXAMINING THE CASE OF ANTIS FANDOM ON SOCIAL MEDIA X

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ABSTRACT

The belief that consuming violent media will lead someone to commit violence is a longstanding societal concern. This concern manifests in the phenomenon of 'antis' within fandoms, which began to emerge around 2016. Initially driven by shipping conflicts, the issue of social justice and the increasing use of social media have allowed this phenomenon to spread easily across various fandoms worldwide. Antis' behavior can be seen as a form of moral panic in several ways: by associating pro-shippers—those who do not agree that consuming violent content will turn someone into a perpetrator or supporter of violence—with sexual offenders and pedophiles, antis use an 'us versus them' mentality to uphold their moral standards and portray themselves as the most moral group.

KEYWORDS Moral Panic, Antis, Fandom, Social Media, Violence.



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INTRODUCTION

"Consuming media containing violence can lead people to engage in violent behavior" is one of the long-standing concerns of society. Watching gruesome films or those with murder themes, playing video games containing violent content are some types of media often feared to have negative effects on consumers. Studies attempting to prove whether this is true have yielded inconclusive results (Carrabine et al., 2009), and one study (Kneer & Ward, 2021) suggests that the gaming community fights against the stigma of violence in games by spending more time playing these games when such stigma exists. Excessive concern over a condition, episode, person, or group of people deemed a threat constitutes a moral panic, which, when viewed rationally and calmly, reveals that these fears or concerns are often exaggerated or misdirected.

Moral panic often occurs around the following objects: men; youth, working class, violent – football hooligans, vandals, and so on; violence in schools; illicit drug use; violence against children, satanic rituals, and pedophiles; sex, violence, and certain media scandals; welfare fraud; and immigration issues (Cohen, 2011;

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Petro, 2018). Reporting through print media on such cases, often using bombastic headlines, sensationalism, and including the opinions of perceived experts, is often implicated as a means of fostering moral panic. However, the emergence of new media relying on the advancement of digital processes and the internet, including social media (Friedman & Friedman, 2008; Manovich, 2003), enables users to share information in real-time and disseminate user-generated content (Walsh, 2020). Social media algorithms and content filtering options often also encourage users to continue receiving information they like from people they also like, resulting in an echo chamber. This makes the reproduction of panic easier to emerge and magnify.

A prominent example of a moral panic on social media, characterized by echo chamber and "us versus them" mentality, is the phenomenon of 'QAnon' in the United States, an online conspiracy theory forum that gained popularity during the US Presidential election and the COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenon is generally considered as an exclusively online cultural phenomenon (Conner & MacMurray, 2022); and one reason why this phenomenon has developed and gained visibility is the #SaveTheChildren movement aimed at raising awareness to end child trafficking (Moran & Prochaska, 2023). QAnon believes that the world is controlled by satanic pedophiles (Roose, 2021), and QAnon has had such an influence that it played a significant role in promoting violence, including the Capitol attack in the United States on January 6, 2020 (Conner & MacMurray, 2022).

On the other hand, there is a new style of moral panic on social media related to "consuming media with violent content can lead people to become perpetrators of crime." One interesting case to further explore is the emergence of "anti" behavior in the realm of popular culture, namely fandom. The term "anti" originally meant anti-fans, being against the text or behavior of fans of a particular text (Gray, 2019) - but since 2016, the meaning of "anti" has shifted to be closer to anti-shipper or antis, due to ship wars in the Voltron: Legendary Defender fandom, interpreted as a dislike of problematic and immoral ships, or someone who dislikes ships with such criteria (Larsen, 2021, Drouin, 2021). Believing that they are protecting the interests of vulnerable groups and the oppressed, antis use various attacks such as labeling, doxxing, death threats, and encouragement for suicide (Larsen, 2021, Drouin, 2021). Simply put, anti behavior originates from a dislike of certain ships, but such anti behavior with this definition persists within fandom circles - now not limited to the Voltron fandom due to the unsatisfactory ending of the series (Drouin, 2021), but also in other fandoms.

Such behavior on social media, especially Twitter, is often associated with what is called cancel culture. Originally an effort to call out others to educate them about inappropriate behavior or statements (Geusens, 2023), cancel culture is now more commonly associated with the practice of publicizing, embarrassing, and suppressing individuals deemed to behave offensively, unethically, or politically incorrect (Zembylas, 2023). As a form of social activism, cancel culture initially defended and advocated for the rights of racial, religious, or sexual minority groups, against class or gender injustices, and so on. However, the shaming efforts commonly found in cancel culture tend to encourage the censorship of ideas through power relations and the silencing of marginalized voices (Mueller, 2021).

The existence of relatively new anti-fandoms makes existing research on this phenomenon limited. Therefore, this article attempts to examine the phenomenon of antis in fandom using the concept of moral panic and through a criminological perspective. This research focuses on antis behavior on social media X and provides arguments regarding how this can be considered a moral panic. Although a relatively new phenomenon, anti behavior is no longer anti-mainstream, at least in the realm of fandom. Just as the QAnon phenomenon originated from small online conspiracy theory forums, the phenomenon of anti behavior on social media also began from ship wars in the Voltron fandom. Therefore, this research aims to elaborate on what antis actually are and how anti behavior on social media can be considered a moral panic based on existing patterns. The significance of this research, in addition to enriching cultural studies in criminology, also demonstrates the factors driving moral panic within the fandom scope on social media.

The argumentation in this article is as follows. First, this article provides a more detailed explanation of the emergence and development of anti behavior in fandom and what is believed by antis. Second, the article will explain echo chambers, cancel culture, and their relevance to the occurrence of moral panic on social media. Next, the discussion will focus on data collection and analysis methods, and based on the collected data, analysis and summary of the research will be discussed further. Case Study: Antis Fandom in X Fundamentally, fandom is one of the places for fans to discuss and share their likes with each other. Music fans like K-Pop, singers or boy bands, fans of film, animation, novels, or comics, and even soccer fans all have their own fandoms with different fandom practices. Fandom activities and scope also evolve with the emergence of the internet. As Halliwell (2020) states, individuals no longer only consume information through digital screens but also actively participate in shaping the internet world. When discussing source material, fans not only praise or criticize (Jenkins, 1992; Williams & Bennett, 2022), but also create derivative works such as fanart or fanfiction, as well as shipping.

As part of fandom activities, shipping can become a serious matter for fans because they can see similarities between themselves and the imaginary relationships they support, reflecting those relationships in their own lives and becoming attached to the pairings they like. Conversely, negative responses and dislikes towards fandom and shipping are then respectively called anti-fandom and anti-shipping. The term anti-fandom was originally defined as a group of people who strongly dislike a text and consider it foolish, stupid, or immoral (Gray (2003), in Buckhardt et al. (2022)). Just as fans gather to discuss and identify based on shared preferences, anti-fans gather around people who share the same dislike (Click, 2020). Therefore, fandom is not immune to conflict. One such conflict is fandom wank; a term used to describe uncontrolled drama, arguments, and nonsensical conflicts in the online realm (Lothian, 2012), often manifested in the form of ship wars (Stone, 2023). Ship war, or warship, is a common term used when fans of certain ships and their detractors argue and conflict.

In the introduction of this article, it has been explained that antis themselves have undergone a shift in meaning since the ship war in the Voltron fandom, at least since 2016. Since this shift in meaning, those who call themselves antis believe that

there is a direct relationship between violence in fiction and real violence, or "fiction affects reality" (Larsen, 2021). With this framework, antis insist that ships - something that is overall a fan's imagination - that are problematic have negative effects: if someone likes a ship that is considered problematic - abusive, incestuous, or with a significant age difference - they are essentially immoral and support such behavior in the real world. Fans who disagree with this understanding of antis then call themselves anti-antis, or pro-shippers. Thus, problematic ships should be avoided, and pro-shippers should be 'educated' to realize that they are wrong.

Anti behavior, as defined in this new sense, initially occurred more frequently on the Tumblr platform. However, since Tumblr banned users from uploading NSFW (not safe for work) content in 2018 - more commonly known as the Tumblr NSFW Ban (Pilipets & Paasonen, 2022; Sybert, 2022), anti activities shifted to Platform X (then known as Twitter), where it developed and persisted. Because unlike the Tumblr platform, X does not directly prohibit and eliminate adult content. Then, what started as a shipping war in the Voltron fandom then evolved into its own ideology within the fandom subculture believed to have genuine and just cause, especially for antis who are not from the Voltron fandom. Because, as found by Drouin (2021) and Larsen (2021), antis try to glorify their ideology by saying that their ideology is anti-pedophilia and anti-incest and cares for those who have experienced trauma. However, in some cases, anti behavior reflects the opposite, including: a fan artist on the social media platform Tumblr who received various online attacks and ended up attempting suicide after their art was considered perpetuating racism, transphobia, incest, pedophilia, and fatphobia (Romano, 2015) and a Hannibal scriptwriter who was accused of endorsing incestuous and pedophilic relationships in the real world after liking a sexually suggestive fan art related to the Hannibal character on their Twitter account (Mason, 2020).

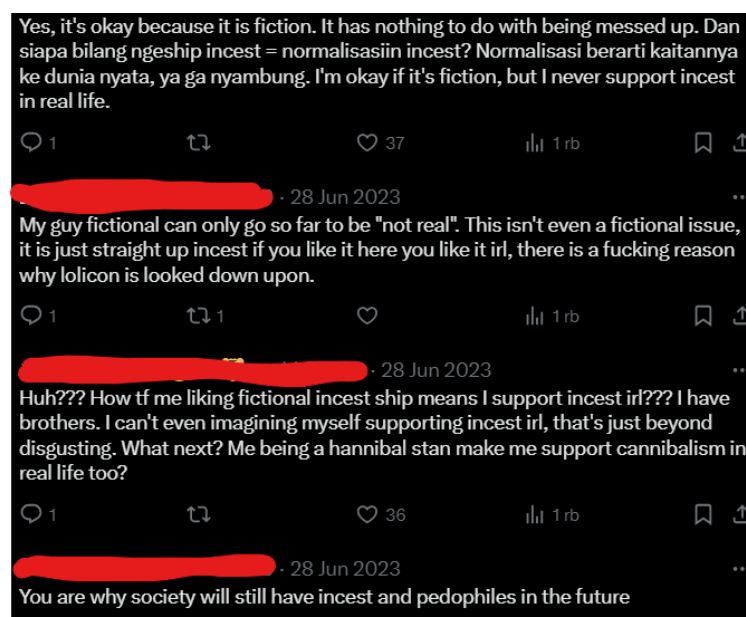


Figure 1: Illustration of an anti's response to a pro-shipper

With the widespread use of tablet and smartphone technology, every individual is no longer just consuming information through digital screens but also actively participating in shaping the internet world (Halliwell, 2020). In 2018 alone, over 4 billion people worldwide were internet users, with 3.196 billion of them being active social media users (Kemp, 2018). This allows social media users across countries to interact and share ideas - including within the fandom scope, where fans actively consume and produce content. The behavior and ideology of antis are no exception. Through social media, especially X - which has a total of 564.1 million users worldwide as of July 2023, with 25.25 million users being from Indonesia (Annur, 2023), antis are not limited to English-speaking fandom segments but also Indonesian-speaking fandoms.

Echo Chamber and Moral Panic

Unlike traditional media, new media such as social media provide options for users to choose the content they want to see. Not only choosing topics, these personalized selection options can also impact ideological preferences (Rodrigues da Cunha Palmieri, 2023). Social media recommendation algorithms and people's tendency to gravitate towards those with similar opinions (homophily) contribute to the creation of echo chambers (Sun, Ma, & Huo, 2022; Alatawi et al, 2021). An echo chamber is a user network where participants only interact with opinions that support existing beliefs and opinions, actively excluding and condemning alternative perspectives (Alatawi et al, 2021).

The nature of social media, which allows users to create and choose the content they want to see, is one reason why social media and moral panic are intertwined. As facilitators of division and hostility, social media tends to support content that is likely to evoke significant emotions and anger – for example, clickbait or viral content – and encourage misunderstanding and distortion of social issues (Walsh, 2020). Through the negative emotions generated by such content, social media echo chambers can foster a sense of hostility towards a common enemy, or a folk devil, and turn concerns into panic. As instruments of panic production, social media widen the path to panic production by allowing netizens to identify and punish deviations, thus forming panic that is crowd-sourced and participatory (Walsh, 2020). Social media can accelerate the formation of echo chambers because echo chambers are not limited to specific regions and provide a platform for anyone to share certain beliefs, however unconventional (Alatawi et al, 2021). In the context of spreading moral panic, social media echo chambers also function as moral framing networks, defined by Flores-Yeffal and Elkins (2020, p.208) as "a particular public space that shares the same values" as the relevant moral entrepreneur.

Moral entrepreneurs, who are perceived as the do-gooders, are "activists" who always advocate that something must be done against particular concerns – in other words, crusading against a threat (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994), and come in two types: first, the rule creators; who believe that the existing rules in society are inadequate and aim to solidify their regime to improve society; and rule enforcers, who exist because rule creators have established new rules and norms and need a group of people to ensure that the new rules are followed by society (Flores-Yeffal &

Sparger, 2022). Therefore, moral entrepreneurs tend to see themselves as the guardians of morality against corruption. Although moral entrepreneurs can be defined as individuals with significant social power capable of influencing the values, morals, and perceptions of others (Flores-Yeffal & Sparger, 2022), in this study, moral entrepreneurs can be a group of netizens in a specific echo chamber who have the ability to influence the moral perceptions of others.

The public assumption that there is "a direct causal relationship between violence in the media and real violence" is a dominant belief in society (Carrabine et al, 2009, p. 408), and the two cases above are just the tip of the iceberg. When defending the belief that fiction affects reality on social media, antis often resort to symbolic violence such as labeling or stigmatization, but also doxxing, death threats, incitement to suicide, and so on (Larsen, 2021; Drouin, 2021). Antis consider such behavior to be necessary warnings to avoid problematic ships or content and a means of shaming those who have liked something "dangerous" because it is seen as supporting such behavior in the real world. However, the issue of violent content in fiction or shipping, an exclusive experience within fandom, may not necessarily be an issue for those not involved in fandom or not using social media regularly. The author will elaborate on how social media echo chambers and moral panic are intertwined to see if antisocial behavior in fandom can indeed be considered a moral panic.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research analysis employs a literature review method, which is used to provide a general overview of a specific research issue or problem (Snyder, 2019) – in the context of this research, it is the behavior of antis as moral panic, as well as identifying the current state of the research problem being addressed and critically evaluating it (Knopf, 2006). The literature review in this research is conducted to examine how antisocial behavior is identified and categorized in other disciplines and to establish why research related to this phenomenon is worth conducting. Thus, in this study, searches were conducted on online databases using keywords to find relevant studies. These searches were performed on journal article databases subscribed to by the University of Indonesia, some of which include ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, and Taylor and Francis, as well as Google Scholar. Keywords used include: fandom, anti-fandom, anti-shipping, antis, fandom discourse, fandom antis, and fandom and moral policing. The researcher also searched for relevant articles through the reference lists of each study deemed eligible.

Next, the researcher determined the criteria for articles considered suitable to be included in the literature review and limited the scope of the literature review. These criteria are:

- a. Publication date: as the phenomenon of antis fandom is relatively new, articles related to fandom studies will be limited from 2017 to 2023.
- b. Type of publication: the literature referred to in this study is research that has been published. However, other publications such as essays, papers, etc., are also included as part of the literature.
- c. Type of study: this literature review includes empirical studies on antis and fandom. The expected articles to be found are those that directly examine

antis phenomenon, but similar phenomena involving moral policing will also be included.

Using these criteria, the researcher can sift through articles that are deemed irrelevant (the term 'shipping' in the search yields more results about literal ship-building) and filter out fandom studies that do not specifically address antisocial behavior or similar phenomena. When the researcher doubts whether the literature in question is relevant for examination in this research, the researcher will read the entire content of the article for determination. After filtering, only 11 studies were considered eligible and included for the literature review.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The activity of shipping is essentially part of fandom activities; primarily an 'internal affair' of fandom. Quoting Mills' work (1959) titled *The Sociological Imagination*, an affair is divided into two things: "one's personal problems in an environment" and "public issues within the social structure." Considering the limited scope of fandom to communities of fans of specific texts or media, issues such as anti-ship as originally understood before 2016 or ship wars should be considered 'personal' matters. However, with the emergence of antis as a movement within fandom no longer confined to the Voltron fandom but also spread to other fandoms, what should have been categorized as personal issues has become a public issue. Public issues are public affairs: there is a feeling that some values valued by the public are threatened (Mills, 1959). Currently, antis groups gather from various social media platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, Discord, and Reddit (Aburime, 2022), giving visibility to their activism. However, familiar issues within fandom may not necessarily be known or recognized by the general public. Therefore, returning to the previous research question, how can antis behavior be referred to as moral panic?

Before explaining this, it is necessary at least to provide a brief history of fandom and fan content production to better understand the context. Fiction is essentially consumed and shaped by society as a means of channeling imagination. Therefore, in cultural studies, fiction is often categorized as a cultural product. Often, fiction deals with themes such as physical violence to sexual violence, or themes considered taboo and offensive; and various studies attempting to examine how power relations or romanticization of sexual violence are constructed in fiction have been conducted (for example, Dox, 1996; Byrne & Taddeo, 2019; Beres, 1999; Galbraith, 2011; Salsabila, 2021). Some studies examine same-sex romance fanwork, which is common in fandom as an expression or exploration of sexuality (see Dennis, 2010; Wood, 2006). However, these studies do not indicate a direct relationship between fictional power relations or sexual violence and the desire to commit or support such violence in the real world.

Given the inherently deviant nature of slash fanwork itself, fans initially consumed such content covertly, in specific forums or sites (Brennan, 2014; Urbańczyk, 2022). Terms like DLDR (don't like don't read) and 'your kink is not my kink and that's okay,' and disregarding ship morality were normal before the emergence of antis (Bradburn, 2023; Urbańczyk, 2022; Aburime, 2022). In Mandarin-speaking fandom, for example, there is a term "keep the fantasy within the circle,

do not disturb the real idol' (圈地自萌, 勿扰正主)" (Zhang, 2021, p.347) to regulate fan behavior when creating fantasies or slash/BL content related to celebrities or idols. In the early 2000s, the popular site used as a platform for writing fanwork was fanfiction.net, often abbreviated as FFn. However, coinciding with the FFn server owner selling space for ads, the server owners did not want to be associated with problematic content, leading to a purge of explicit sexual content – the same happened with livejournal sites (Urbańczyk, 2022). In reaction to this, fans formed the Archive of Our Own site, which is ad-free, where fans can produce any content with a tagging system to indicate that the produced content has specific warnings. Younger fans or those unfamiliar with such history might associate these tags with 'openly supporting problematic content' (Urbańczyk, 2022) and use this as a weapon to get the site blocked (Wang & Ge, 2022).

Actually, moral panic behavior can be identified by several characteristics, as explained by Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994): first, there is an increasing concern about the behavior of certain groups whose actions are deemed to have certain impacts on society; second, there is hostility towards those deemed to have threatening behavior. Third, there is an agreement that the threat is real, serious, and caused by the faults and behaviors of the group; fourth, there is an exaggeration of the problem so that it is not proportional to what actually happens; and fifth, there is volatility – moral panic easily arises and disappears, although some moral panics can occur regularly. Cohen (2011) explains that the object of this moral panic, or folk devil, can be seen in the dichotomy:

They are new (lying dormant perhaps, but hard to recognize; deceptively ordinary and routine, but invisibly creeping up the moral horizon) – but also old (camouflaged versions of traditional and well-known evils). They are damaging in themselves – but also merely warning signs of the real, much deeper and more prevalent condition. They are transparent (anyone can see what's happening) – but also opaque: accredited experts must explain the perils hidden behind the superficially harmless ... (p. viii)

The characteristics of moral panic can be seen in how antis behavior occurs on social media. Regardless of individual antis opinions (Larsen, 2021; Aburime, 2022), antis beliefs can be summarized as follows: first, the assumption that fictional media with abuse and sexual violence will cause viewers to think that such content is acceptable and can be imitated in the real world, even though the target audience of such media is adults. Second, one should not create content featuring characters experiencing sexual trauma because it can trigger consumers; third, those who create such content are perpetrators of abuse or at least glorify violence in the real world; and fourth, anyone who creates fictional character content under 18 is a pedophile and sexual predator in the real world (Aburime, 2021). Larsen (2021) adds that, for antis, problematic and adult content will definitely be consumed by individuals too young to have critical thinking skills – therefore, problematic content should not be created, and if it exists, it should only be disseminated privately; moreover, the existence of problematic content seems to validate the perpetrators of crimes for their actions and may encourage others to become perpetrators of crimes.

If fiction equals reality, and shipping fictional content considered problematic equals supporting and becoming perpetrators of crimes in the real world, then pro-shippers are folk devils who must be silenced and blamed. This meets the first and second characteristics of moral panic: antis have increasing concerns about fictional content deemed problematic and potentially causing crimes. Meanwhile, hostility towards the folk devil is shown by antis through the "us" (heroes) versus "them" (villains) narrative as proposed by Cohen (1972) in Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), where who the hero and who the villain is determined by morality – in this case, antis are sane people who uphold good morality and play a role in educating those deemed less knowledgeable; and pro-shippers are portrayed as sexual predators targeting minors or perpetrators of violence. The us versus them dichotomy on social media leads to the creation of echo chambers, especially when antis environments refrain from interacting with non-antis sources, spreading misinformation and rumors, and instilling fear of leaving the group with harassment threats and targeting (Aburime, 2021).

Misinformation is one of the instruments used by antis in spreading their panic, especially to fandom laypersons who may not necessarily know that the root of antis behavior is purely fictional. As explained by Cohen (2011) and studied by Moran and Prochaska (2023), violence against children and sex is part of the object of moral panic. By hiding behind social justice issues and using heavy words, especially if these antis are activists and active on social media, antis issues are not only shipping war issues in fandom but also become familiar panics: "consuming violent media will lead someone to commit violence." The ease with which antis behavior spreads across fandoms and persists for a long time may be due to the tendency in social media to be politically correct – which is essentially an effort to avoid potentially offensive content and encourage the use of more friendly language towards minority groups (Moss & O'Connor, 2020; Pogrmilović, 2018) – along with the opening up of social justice issues. Authoritarian political correctness focuses on safety and purity, so its efforts take the form of censoring offensive language and cancel culture. As noted by some researchers (Aburime, 2022; Bradburn, 2023), antis use canceling methods to enforce their morality. In the realm of social media, antis' use of social justice issues is such that at first glance, it is difficult to distinguish whether an accusation, for example, of pedophilia against someone refers to the fact that they are indeed pedophiles or because of reading fictional content.

Through social media, moral panic can act as both a facilitator of division and a panic production instrument (Walsh, 2020); and antis also use the same platform to spread their panic. Therefore, although historically in fandom, pro-shippers with the definition of supporting shipping as a fictional hobby without any connection to morality and human life in the real world (Aburime, 2022) have existed first, pro-shippers are more synonymous with problematic shippers and supporters of violence as defined by antis; even though not necessarily those who identify as pro-shippers would also like fictional crime content. The urge of antis to eliminate or ban content deemed problematic is actually similar to silencing the voices of queer groups who ironically are the majority demographic of antis, as seen in cases of moral panic related to comic books in the United States (Condis & Stanfill, 2022);

where anti-comic book groups claim that the representation of homosexual groups in comics will encourage readers, especially children, to become homosexual. Meanwhile, what exists in fiction does not necessarily reflect reality. Galbraith's research (2011) on lolicon content consumption in Japan shows that consumption of violence pornography does not necessarily reflect a person's desire to participate in sexual crimes and torture against young girls – because male consumers consume such content as escapism: distancing themselves from real women and choosing fictional women. Similar to antis behavior, and like other moral panics, lolicon consumers are associated with pedophiles in the real world due to fears of certain folk devils, and one case of violence associated with owning 'problematic' content is used to generalize the entire population and urge to censor and remove such content.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of antis in fandom, along with the notion that fiction affects reality, is not fundamentally different from long-standing moral panics related to fiction in society. However, the antis phenomenon is unique because it originates from shipping wars that have been disproportionately exaggerated and successfully spread and persisted within the fandom sphere due to the social justice agenda brought in to obscure the root of such behavior. Consequently, there is a belief that they are indeed protecting minority and vulnerable groups, instead of causing harm by echoing narratives similar to those used to silence the voices of these vulnerable groups themselves. This belief is reinforced by echo chambers on social media, made possible by content personalization and by antis themselves who strengthen these echo chambers with targeting threats and the "us versus them" mentality characteristic of moral panic. The emergence of this relatively new antis phenomenon leaves ample room for further in-depth studies, especially from the criminological perspective examining crime and culture phenomena. Subsequent research could explore this phenomenon from the context of Indonesia, examining how it is similar to or different from the English-language fandom context to enrich Indonesian literature and studies.

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