


Experiencing Communication Through Youtube Membership: A Phenomenological Study on The Deankt Community

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Keywords: Communication Experience, YouTube Membership, Alfred Schutz, Phenomenology, DEANKT	YouTube Membership is a monetization feature that not only provides financial benefits for content creators but also facilitates exclusive communication spaces between creators and audiences. Amid the growing trend of digital participation in Indonesia, it is important to examine how users experience and interpret interactions within such digital communities. This study explores how audiences engage in communication through the YouTube Membership feature, focusing on the DEANKT channel. Using Alfred Schutz's phenomenological approach, it investigates both the "because motives" (past experiences) and "in order to motives" (future expectations) behind users' decisions to subscribe. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and participant observation with six long-term members of the DEANKT community. The findings reveal that key motivations include emotional attachment to the creator, access to exclusive content, and the desire for a sense of belonging in a digital community. Concretely, members reported intimate and personalized interactions such as name mentions during live streams, use of visual symbols like badges and emojis, and active participation in closed forums such as Discord. These interactions fostered emotionally fulfilling and participatory communication experiences that also reinforced members' digital identities. This study underscores that YouTube Membership serves a dual role—not only as a monetization tool but also as a powerful medium for building meaningful and tightly connected digital communities.
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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has dramatically transformed the way people access entertainment, information, and social interaction. In Indonesia, this transformation is particularly evident in the shifting consumption patterns from traditional media such as television and radio to digital platforms like YouTube, Netflix, and Spotify. The widespread availability of internet access and smartphones has accelerated this change, making digital content an integral part of daily life for people across all social strata.

Among the many innovations within the digital ecosystem, YouTube stands out as the world's largest video-sharing platform, boasting more than 143 million users in Indonesia as of February 2025 (Statista, 2025). YouTube's dominance is not only a reflection of its vast content diversity—ranging from entertainment to education—but also of its ability to

continuously adapt to the evolving needs and behaviors of its users. For content creators, YouTube offers unprecedented opportunities to publish their work, reach large audiences, and build personal brands. For audiences, YouTube provides a virtually limitless array of content, easily accessible at any time and from anywhere.

The rise of YouTube has also created new economic models for content monetization. One of the most significant innovations in this regard is the YouTube Membership feature, which allows creators to offer exclusive content and perks to their followers through a monthly subscription system. This feature not only provides creators with an additional revenue stream but also fosters a closer, more interactive relationship with their audience (Sarahdiva & Ahmadi, 2024). Since its introduction in 2018, YouTube Membership has become increasingly important for Indonesian creators, enabling them to monetize their work while strengthening their bond with fans. This phenomenon marks a shift in the role of the audience from passive consumers to active participants in the digital ecosystem (Faiqah et al., 2015).

YouTube Membership offers a range of exclusive benefits, including early access to videos, members-only live streams, custom emojis, badges, and participation in private community posts. With membership fees starting as low as IDR 9,900 per month, the feature is accessible to a wide range of fans, making it a relatively affordable way to support creators while enjoying additional privileges. Compared to other streaming services, YouTube Membership offers a unique blend of affordability and personalized engagement, which appeals strongly to the younger, digitally native generation.

The growing trend of fandom in Indonesia, particularly among young people, further amplifies the appeal of Membership features. Fans are increasingly seeking ways to connect more closely with their idols or favorite creators, as seen in the rise of K-Pop fandoms and the popularity of live streaming and interactive social media events. These trends reflect a broader cultural shift towards more personal, direct, and participatory forms of engagement. YouTube Membership is at the forefront of this shift, enabling fans to move beyond passive viewership and become active supporters and community members (Eriyanto, 2020).

In this context, the nature of the relationship between creators and audiences is undergoing profound change. Fans now expect more than just content—they seek meaningful interaction, recognition, and a sense of belonging within a community. Features such as members-only live chats and exclusive streams allow for direct communication with creators, fostering a feeling of intimacy and exclusivity. This dynamic is further reinforced by the use of badges, emojis, and other visual markers that signify membership status and confer a sense of pride and accomplishment.

However, the success of YouTube Membership is not guaranteed. Its effectiveness depends largely on the perceived value of the interaction between creators and audiences (Hendika Permana, 2021). Not all creators are able to fully leverage the potential of Membership features, and one of the main challenges lies in ensuring that the interactions offered are genuinely engaging and meet the needs of the audience. If the perceived benefits are insufficient or the sense of community is weak, audiences may be reluctant to subscribe or maintain their membership.

Aldean Tegar Gemilang, known as DEANKT, is a prominent Indonesian content creator who has successfully harnessed the power of YouTube Membership. With over 1.3 million subscribers and more than 30,000 active members, DEANKT is currently the Indonesian YouTuber with the highest number of memberships. DEANKT's content focuses on gaming and entertainment, and since activating the Membership feature in March 2023, he has cultivated a highly engaged and loyal community. DEANKT offers multiple membership tiers, ranging from IDR 10,000 to IDR 1,000,000 per month, each providing different levels of access and perks. With an average membership fee of IDR 39,000, his estimated monthly revenue from memberships alone exceeds IDR 1.1 billion.

DEANKT's channel is notable not only for its large subscriber base and impressive membership numbers but also for its extensive content library. As of 2025, the channel boasts over 2,800 videos, including 406 membership-exclusive videos, 275 non-membership videos, and more than 2,100 shorts. This rich variety of content, combined with active community management and frequent live streams, has helped DEANKT build a vibrant and inclusive digital community.

Given the scale and success of DEANKT's Membership program, his channel provides an ideal case study for exploring the dynamics of audience experience, motivation, and communication within the context of YouTube Membership. This research aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice by examining the subjective experiences of DEANKT's audience, with a particular focus on how Membership features shape their sense of community, engagement, and identity.

The primary research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What motivates audiences to join the Membership program on DEANKT's YouTube channel?
2. How do members interpret and experience their roles and identities within the Membership community?
3. What are the communication patterns and interactions that define the Membership experience?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to provide valuable insights for academics, media practitioners, and content creators. It aims to deepen our understanding of the shifting paradigms of digital communication and audience engagement, while also offering practical guidance for creators seeking to build more relevant and engaging content strategies.

Through a qualitative, phenomenological approach, this research explores the multifaceted experiences of Membership users—probing not only their motivations and expectations but also the meanings and values they derive from their participation. In doing so, the study contributes to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the evolving landscape of digital media, community-building, and audience-creator interaction in Indonesia

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing phenomenology as the main framework to deeply understand the lived experiences and meanings constructed by members of the

DEANKT YouTube community. The phenomenological method was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore the subjective experiences of individuals, focusing on how they perceive, interpret, and make sense of their participation in the Membership program (Sugiyono, 2018).

The research involved six informants who had subscribed to DEANKT's YouTube Membership for more than two months. These informants were selected using snowball sampling, starting with a few known active members and expanding the participant pool through their recommendations. The selection criteria ensured that all informants were actively engaged in the Membership community and had sufficient experience to provide meaningful insights.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews and participant observation. The interviews were carried out via online platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp, allowing for flexible and comfortable interactions. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and covered topics such as motivations for joining Membership, experiences of communication with the creator and other members, perceived benefits, and challenges encountered. To complement the interviews, participant observation was conducted by joining members-only live chats, Discord groups, and comment sections. This approach provided a richer understanding of the dynamics and interactions within the community.

The data analysis process followed the model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts and observation notes were carefully coded and organized into themes related to motives, experiences, and meanings. The analysis focused on identifying patterns and variations in the informants' narratives, as well as interpreting these findings in light of the phenomenological perspective.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were strictly observed. All informants provided informed consent and were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The researcher maintained a reflexive stance, acknowledging personal biases and striving to represent the informants' experiences as authentically as possible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the findings from in-depth interviews and participant observation with six active members of the DEANKT YouTube Membership. The discussion is structured around the main themes that emerged from the data: motivations for joining, the meaning of membership, communication patterns, community dynamics, and challenges faced by members.

Motivations for Joining Membership

The decision to join DEANKT's Membership was shaped by a complex interplay of emotional, social, and practical factors. Many informants described a long-standing relationship with DEANKT, having followed his content for months or even years prior to subscribing. This history of engagement fostered a sense of loyalty and gratitude, prompting them to support the creator financially. As one informant stated:

"I've been watching DEANKT since the early days. His content always entertains me,

and when the Membership feature was introduced, I felt it was a way to give back and show appreciation.”

Beyond loyalty, the desire for exclusive access and recognition was a powerful motivator. Membership offered tangible benefits such as early access to videos, members-only live streams, custom emojis, and badges. These perks created a sense of privilege and distinction, making members feel valued and special. Another informant explained:

“The badges and emojis are fun, but what’s really important is the direct interaction. When DEANKT reads my comment or mentions my name during a live stream, it makes me feel noticed.”

The need for community and belonging was also a significant driver. Informants expressed a desire to connect with like-minded individuals who shared their admiration for DEANKT. The Membership community was described as a safe and supportive space where members could share personal stories, seek advice, and form genuine friendships. This sense of belonging was particularly important for those who felt isolated in their offline lives or who lacked opportunities for social interaction.

These findings resonate strongly with the literature on digital communities. As noted by Seraj (2012), users often pursue participation in online communities as a way to achieve social identity, emotional connection, and cultural value through meaningful interaction. Similarly, Kraut and Resnick (2012) emphasize that intrinsic motivations such as loyalty and social belonging significantly impact long-term engagement in online communities like YouTube. Wang et al. (2022) also highlight that emotional fulfillment, platform recognition, and a sense of shared community drive sustained participation in experience-sharing platforms.

The Meaning of Membership

For most informants, Membership was more than just a transactional relationship; it was a source of meaning and personal fulfillment. Many described Membership as a badge of honor, representing their commitment to the creator and the community. This sense of pride was amplified by public recognition from DEANKT and from other members.

Membership also contributed to personal growth and empowerment. Informants reported increased confidence and social skills as a result of participating in group activities, leading discussions, or helping other members. The supportive environment of the community encouraged self-expression and experimentation, allowing members to explore new interests and develop new talents.

The sense of belonging fostered by Membership had a profound impact on the informants’ lives. For some, the community provided a much-needed source of emotional support during difficult times. Others found inspiration and motivation through their interactions with DEANKT and fellow members. One informant shared:

“Being part of this community has helped me through some tough times. I know I’m not alone, and that means a lot.”

These observations echo recent research findings. Naslund et al. (2014) demonstrate that peer support on YouTube fosters a sense of normalcy and emotional resilience, especially among marginalized groups. Similarly, Rotman and Preece (2010) emphasize that online video-sharing communities function as spaces for both identity expression and emotional

reinforcement. Etengoff et al. (2022) further argue that platforms like YouTube contribute to informational and relational support exchanges that lead to empowerment and self-worth. These studies support the notion that YouTube Membership communities can have significant psychosocial impact beyond entertainment or financial support.

Communication Patterns and Interactions

Membership transformed the nature of communication between the creator and the audience, as well as among members themselves. Informants reported experiencing a higher level of intimacy and recognition in their interactions with DEANKT. Personalized shoutouts during live streams, direct replies to comments, and occasional private messages made members feel seen and appreciated. One informant recounted:

“It’s amazing when DEANKT reads my comment or mentions my name during a live stream. It makes me feel like I matter.”

The communication experience extended beyond interactions with the creator. Membership facilitated the formation of sub-communities through platforms like Discord and WhatsApp, where members could engage in group discussions, collaborative activities, and mutual support. These spaces were characterized by a spirit of camaraderie and inclusivity, with members often referring to each other as friends or even family. Informants highlighted the importance of these relationships in enhancing their overall well-being and sense of identity.

Symbolic interaction played a crucial role in shaping the Membership experience. The use of badges, custom emojis, and other visual markers signified membership status and fostered a sense of pride. These symbols served as a form of social currency within the community, reinforcing members’ sense of belonging and recognition. Informants described feeling a sense of accomplishment and validation when their contributions were acknowledged by the creator or fellow members.

These findings align with existing research on digital symbolic communication. Kocik et al. (2024) noted that platforms like Discord encourage the formation of intimate, badge-oriented subcommunities where symbolic interaction promotes identity performance and belonging. Wohn (2019) observed that moderators and members on Twitch, through badges and shoutouts, perform labor that fosters intimacy and perceived recognition in live content spaces. Additionally, Mastellone (2021) emphasized how social markers in Discord signal hierarchy and trust, reinforcing relational dynamics in creator-centered online communities.

Community Dynamics and Group Identity

The DEANKT Membership community was characterized by a strong sense of group identity and collective purpose. Members described the community as inclusive, supportive, and welcoming to newcomers. There was a shared understanding that everyone was there to support DEANKT and each other, creating a positive and uplifting environment.

Group activities, such as collaborative gaming sessions, watch parties, and community challenges, further strengthened the bonds between members. These activities provided opportunities for members to showcase their skills, share their passions, and build deeper relationships. Informants emphasized the importance of these shared experiences in fostering a sense of unity and belonging.

The community also played a role in shaping members' digital identities. By participating in Membership activities and displaying badges or emojis, members signaled their affiliation with the group and their commitment to its values. This sense of identity extended beyond the digital realm, influencing how members perceived themselves and how they interacted with others online.

These findings are supported by Wenbin (2024), who observed that participatory culture among YouTube and VTuber fan communities fosters strong collective identity, particularly through live chats, badges, and group rituals. Similarly, Popescu (2023) highlights that YouTube communities function as co-constructed spaces of shared values and performative group identity, with badges and challenges reinforcing group cohesion. In line with this, Steenkamp (2018) points out that such online fan communities often contribute to long-term identity work and a sense of purpose among members, especially when values are aligned with the creator.

Challenges and Limitations

While the overall experience of Membership was overwhelmingly positive, informants also identified several challenges and limitations. Financial constraints were a common concern, with some members struggling to maintain their subscriptions over time. The tiered structure of Membership occasionally led to feelings of exclusion among lower-tier members, who perceived a gap in access to certain perks or recognition.

Managing online conflicts and maintaining a positive community atmosphere were also highlighted as challenges. As the community grew, differences in opinion and occasional misunderstandings became more common. Informants emphasized the importance of effective moderation and clear guidelines to ensure a respectful and inclusive environment.

Despite these challenges, the informants remained committed to their Membership and expressed a strong desire to continue supporting DEANKT and the community. They viewed the benefits of Membership as far outweighing the drawbacks and were optimistic about the future of the community.

The Transformative Power of Membership

The narratives of the informants illustrate the transformative power of YouTube Membership in redefining the audience-creator relationship and fostering new forms of digital community. Membership is not merely a tool for monetization; it is a platform for meaningful interaction, personal growth, and collective identity formation.

The DEANKT community exemplifies how digital platforms can facilitate deep and lasting connections among individuals who may never meet in person. Through shared experiences, mutual support, and symbolic recognition, members construct a sense of belonging that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of recognizing and nurturing the social dimensions of digital Membership. Creators who actively engage with their members, foster inclusive communities, and provide opportunities for meaningful interaction are more likely to cultivate loyal and supportive audiences.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that YouTube Membership functions not only as a monetization tool but also as a meaningful platform for fostering emotional connection, digital identity, and active community engagement. Through a phenomenological analysis of DEANKT's members, the research found that users are driven by a blend of loyalty, the desire for exclusivity, and a search for belonging—resulting in emotionally rich communication experiences and strong social bonds. These findings affirm that Membership features can transform passive audiences into active participants and loyal supporters. Future research should explore broader demographic groups, longitudinal impacts of Membership engagement, and comparative studies across different creator communities. For content creators, it is recommended to maintain consistent interaction, personalize communication, and design tiered benefits that go beyond content access to nurture community participation and long-term loyalty.

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