

Local content in 48 Group Branding Strategy: Focused on JKT48 as a Case Study

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Abstract

Girl group development as a brand, lately is a fascinate object to be examined, and one of them is AKB48. AKB48 has many brand derivatives with diverse concepts to answer the needs of its target audience. This study examined how AKB48 as a brand develop their brand and creates their brand architecture as a part of their brand strategy. This study focused on JKT48 one of AKB48's sister group to understand how AKB48 trying to expand their market, using hybridization and cultural content to match with the target audience preference. Hopefully, this finding could give a new perspective in branding strategy for other brands especially in music industry or entertainment industry in Indonesia.

Keywords - *AKB48; JKT48; branding; brand architecture; hybridization; cultural content*

1. Introduction

AKB48 whose received a Guinness World Record as the most members girl group in 2013 has been proving to the world about their existence as an artist and as a brand [1]. Recently, there are a lot of girl band and boy band groups that being develop and give a quite contribution to the recent trends, especially to the younger audience. Their existence could be a thread to AKB48 as a brand, but AKB48 manage to be an acknowledged active girl group up until now, which is a great achievement for AKB48. For example, in the recent event of MAMA 2017 "Mnet Asian Music Awards" that was held in 3 locations, Vietnam, Japan and Hong Kong, AKB48 was invited as one of the performer [2]. MAMA is an annual music awards and global music festival that being held by Mnet one of well known music television channel in South Korea. AKB48 was performed a collaboration song with some Korean's girl group such as I.O.I, PRISTIN, Weki Meki and Fromis_9. In this event, Akimoto Yasushi, AKB48 group producer got an "Inspired Achievement" award and AKB48 also got an award as "Best Asian Artist Japan" which they also won it in 2009, 2012 and 2015 [2]. Moreover, in this event Mnet and AKB48 group announced that they will collaborate to create a project called Produce48. This is very interesting to examine how AKB48 groups could manage their popularity among others girl groups with the tight competition between girl groups not only girl groups from Japan but also from Korea (K-Pop), and even with other country pop group, which share the same target audience as them. This study will also examine AKB48 group's brand strategy to increase their brand awareness toward the audiences.

1.1. AKB48 and 48 Group

As mentioned above, AKB48 has a lot of members and even get a Guinness World Record for that, but actually right now, it even bigger than what was mentioned on the Guinness World Record. AKB48 has 11 sister groups according to their official website, and there is 6 overseas sister groups among them [3]. AKB48 also have some more other sister groups which still in development progress. According to Ueda, this sister groups emerge because of the popularity of AKB48 and collectively called "the AKB48 group"

or AKB48G [4]. These groups also called “the 48 Group” by the fans to distinguish them with their rival “the 46 Group” which created to be the official rival of AKB48 Group, although they have the same producer, Akimoto Yasushi. The detail about 48 Group will be explained in the next chapter.

1.2. Research Focus and Methodology

This study focused on one of their overseas sister group in Indonesia, JKT48. JKT48 is a good example to explain how AKB48 strategy to expand their market and gain awareness through its 48 group. Another reason to choose JKT48 is because this group is AKB48’s first overseas sister group which already gain acknowledgment in their home country and recently gain awareness outside their home country such as Japan and other sister group country.

This research will examined collected data from various fans pages, official social media account and published data from journalism reports also supported by primary and secondary data research that collected from interview data, previous journal or literature. Using hybridization theory combined with brand architecture theory to analyze and examined the data. First, examined AKB48 and its sister group using brand architecture theory. Then finding its branding strategy through it. Second, examined the market and specify its target audience, then using hybridization theory to analyze the strategy to penetrate this foreign market, in this case is Indonesian market. Third, create a conclusion as a result to this study. The objective to this study is to examined 48 group branding strategy through JKT48 that might give a new perspective or ideas for others brand especially for Indonesian artists, other cultural product or Indonesian entertainment business.

2. AKB48

Akimoto Yasushi is a songwriter and producer that has produced a lot of TV programs, and hit songs for some popular Japanese singer and idol groups. In 2005 he got an idea to create an idol group that has different concept among others. If the others idol group perform occasional concerts and appear primarily on television and seems ‘un-reachable’ by their fans, he wants to create an idol girl group that has ‘reachable’ concept. He wants to reduce the distance that created between idols and their fans. From this idea, the concept of “idol you can meet” was born and AKB48 is the name of this idol group. Using this concept, he creates a theater concept performance, where AKB48 could perform everyday and their fans could come to see them directly. They also have a “handshake” event, which enables their fans to come and meet their idol personally.

The name of AKB48 named after the Akihabara district in Tokyo, where AKB48’s theatre is located which in 8th floor of Don Quixote shopping center. Later on this naming system will be followed by its sister groups. Although their first performance was only attended by 7 audiences, AKB48 keeps improving and developing their skill. They also gain more members that split up into a team. Up until now AKB48 has 6 teams which are A, K, B, 4, 8 and team *kenkyūsei* (trainee team who are understudies for the group). By splitting members into different groups it will allow them to perform and doing the events almost daily, because they can rotate performances and perform simultaneously at several events. These team system also adapted by AKB48’s sister groups along with others mechanism.

From 2012 until 2018 this group is included in one of the top highest-earning musical performers in Japan by their album sales. This could happened because one of their event, which is *sousenkyou* (general election). This general election event was invented by Akimoto Yasushi in 2009 to answer the fans complaint about their system to choose which member that would perform in their singles. In every AKB48’s single, around 16 members were elected by the management to perform. Before the general election event was held, the management will choose which member that could perform in the singles, music videos and other promotions, based on their performance. But apparently the management hand picking choices were not really satisfied the AKB48’s fans; therefore, Akimoto lets the fans to choose their own members to be the *senbatsu* members (chosen members). This general election is using voting system that allows anyone who has the ballot ticket to vote, and there is no limitation of using the ballot ticket for each person. Fans could get this ballot ticket though the CD singles that they sold before the election event [3]. Therefore, hey manage to sold more than one million copies particularly for every general election singles. For example, in 2018, their single “Teacher Teacher” which sold over 3 million according to Billboard [5]. This could happened because, in this general election, they included their

entire sister group which increase the euphoria of their fans; moreover their international fans who could participate in this event. Every year this event manage to gain media attention in Japan especially this year because it is the first international fans related event for them, they called it the ‘world general election’ event.

2.1. AKB48 as a Brand

As cited on Keller, the definition of brand according to AMA (American Marketing Association), is a “name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition.” It is including a name, logo, or symbol for a new product. However, many practicing manager refer a brand as more than that. According to them brand is something that has actually created a certain amount of awareness, reputation, prominence, and so on in the marketplace [6]. Meanwhile, branding is a process to create an entity in the consumer’s mind so that they can see it. They can see a representation but behind this representation what they actually have is a whole series of images, beliefs and actions. According to Wheeler, an effective branding is when a brand created properly, therefore it can survive longer in a market and keep profitably [7].

According to the definition above, AKB48 could be described as a brand and their marketing strategies which already mentioned in previous chapter such as ‘handshakes’ and ‘general election’ serve as a part of branding strategies because AKB48 is an entity that has specific identity that could be called as a brand. AKB48 build their brand equity towards their core value “idol you can meet” as a part of their brand identity, and later supported by other marketing action with a long-term strategy to implement the core value [8]. To develop their brand equity, AKB48 also create some brand activations as a part of those long-term marketing strategy, using brand activity or events that created based on their core value. All of those activities are created to develop an intimate bonding between the idols and their fans or their target audiences.

2.2. Architecture Brand AKB48 (48 Group)

According to Junior, AKB48 is the corporate brand in the 48 Group, and the main brand portfolio strategy is the branded house strategy [8]. Which in this strategy AKB48’s sister group serves as its product, because as mentioned in the previous chapter, the brand value of AKB48 and its strategy are inherited to its sister group or its derivative brands.



Fig. 1 The official AKB48 group

Each sister group has a specific concept and target audience based on their location. This is a brand portfolio strategy of AKB48 which explain as; a) Competition, which to secure their market share between others girl group. They develop those sister group which share the same value as AKB48 to maintain their consumer loyalty; b) Financial performance, with some join events such as world *senbatsu sousesenkyou*, brand could gain more profit because of the increasing of target audience (the participation of overseas fans), while brand could also reduce marketing expenses for promotion; c) Brand extension, AKB48 trying to increase their brand capacity towards 48 group. With brand extension, AKB48 could fulfill the needs of different consumer in different area or even in international markets; they also could increase their consumer awareness [8].

3. Market

Market is a various grouping of customers that have various preference and liking [9]. The segmented market or called target market is a group of market who share common interest and needs [10]. In idol world, fans are the important element in the idol group branding strategy, because those fans are also acted as their target market.

AKB48 whose become more popular lately because of the development in digital media information. The rapid information and easily access to gain them is one of the benefactors to gain consumer awareness about AKB48 group. Produce 48, a collaboration project between AKB48 and Mnet is one of the recent example. According to Kizgin, Jamal, Lal Dey and Rana, online communication connects individual and business related connection. They also mentioned, social media is a place to share knowledge and information that can be major drivers for social learning [11]. Those people who involved in and the user of this media called as a media fans. According to Burgess, this media fans is a hardcore fans, gullible and easily manipulated by dangerous mass culture but they also have an important role in a brand development [12].

3.1. Indonesian Market and Hybridization

The recent music trend in Indonesia is still connected with the recent pop culture. The reason behind it is the xenocentrism believe inside Indonesian market. Xenocentrism is a believe that common in postcolonial societies like Indonesia, that a foreign culture (especially belong to the former colonizer) is superior rather than one's own [13]. Therefore, Indonesian market are easily to accept the adapted version of Indonesian songs or music that already mixed with the world pop trend, such as K-Pop. K-Pop phenomenon and its popularity in Indonesia give a lot contribution for Indonesian music trend, for example, the emerging of local group boy band and girl band with Korean style and moods. Although their existence is not long lasting, but the audiences still have the same preference as before. Which, they prefer international or world trend of pop rather than Indonesian original culture. This practice is also a form of cultural hybridity, which formed because of the mimicry process from target audience towards the dominant pop culture. In the process it could develop to be an ambivalence tendency towards the dominant pop culture, because this target audience tends to combine their own pop culture and the dominant pop culture in order to match with their preference. In this situation this target audience showed some resistance towards the dominant culture, because they not really adapting all the dominant culture and sometimes still showing their own nature [14]

4. JKT48

JKT48 was born in 2011 during a discussion between Dentsu Indonesia an advertising agency and Akimoto Yasushi, after Dentsu Indonesia team learn through AFA X event where Akimoto Yasushi was invited to talk in a Cool Japan forum. At that time Akimoto Yasushi mentioned that he intended to do an expanding strategy for AKB48. Moreover at the same time, Dentsu Indonesia team also searching for a new business content which suitable with the idea of creating an idol group. In Japan, AKB48 is also collaborating with Dentsu Japan, therefore the collaboration between these two companies is quite feasible. This is also confirming the AKB48's portfolio brand strategy that mentioned on the previous chapter.

JKT48 got their final member for their first generation in November 2011. Their first debut on TV was in 20 December 2011 and receives good response from the audiences.

4.1. Indonesian Fans

The question is why Indonesia was chosen as the first overseas sister group for AKB48? According to Mr. Genjek Pok, the Associate Creative Director of JKT48, it was because the perfect timing between this two company and the condition of Indonesian market that suitable for this project. Actually, there were another candidate from another countries to be an AKB48 sister group, but at that time they haven't prepare their market yet [15]

JKT48 got warm welcome because of the previous fans from AKB48 in Indonesia, therefore this idol concept is not really surprising for the 'old' fans, they even very enthusiastic waiting for this project.

Another factor is because the Japanese culture that already blooms in Indonesia through manga and anime [16]. These factors become important to penetrate Indonesian consumer or fans.

4.2. Hybridization and Local content in JKT48

Although Indonesian market have xenocentrism believe and tends to follow the recent pop trend, but they also got some preference and limitation because of their life as a part of society which has certain social value and culture. Consequently, JKT48 which a derivative brand from AKB48, could do something different in their strategy or brand activation according to their target audience preference.

JKT48 try to answer this needs through various project, one of them is the JKT48 sub unit, JKT48 Dangdut, is a sub unit using dangdut genre from Indonesian original music genre. Another interesting fact is this unit member that consist Rina Chikano (Chikarina) a Japanese transfer member from AKB48, whose later change her name to Siti Rinayanti to match with the Indonesian culture. The numbers of songs that they sung were from AKB48 singles and those songs were modified into Dangdut music.



Fig. 2 JKT48 Dangdut sub unit

AKB48's sister group use a franchise system, which means its brand value and main concept will follow the masterbrand. However, JKT48 still got freedom to create their own image according to the market condition while still maintaining their parent brand's value. For example, the recent Re:Boost campaign. This campaign was created based on the fans discontent of JKT48. They complained about the JKT48's event and performance, which mostly held on the capital city (Jakarta) and neglected their sub-urban or smaller city fans. It was contradicting with JKT48 motto who wants to be a national idol. The JKT48 management team with the JKT48 member creates this project to answer this problem. Through this campaign JKT48 renewing their slogan from "idol you can meet" become "idol that will come to meet you" so instead of fans who come to meet JKT48, JKT48 member will come to their fans area. One of the activation is called JKT48 Circus. It was a program that allow JKT48 member to create a carnival like event, such as mini stage performance, two shot, handshake event and other special program. Through this event JKT48 try to reach out their fans and strengthen the bond between fans (consumer) and JKT48 (brand).

Another precedent is the costume alteration for JKT48. AKB48 was well known of their amazing costume as mentioned in a Japanese TV program Tanken Bakumon AKB48 Group Ishou Koubou [17]. Most of their costume have cute and girly image, with short skirt above their knees. In Indonesia, this kind of costume could create a controversial issues especially social norm and religious issues. In the recent JKT48's music video "UZA," JKT48 members dancing in a shirt with hot pants that show a quite a lot portion of their legs.



Fig. 3 JKT48 "UZA" music video costume

This could be a problem if they use this kind of costume for a live performance; therefore, they got another variation of costume for this song. Genjek Pok said, they did this to protect the member [15].



Fig. 4 JKT48 “UZA” performing costume

Another exhibit is the “Kimi Wa Melody” costume. “Kimi Wa Melody” is the graduation song that chosen by Melody Nurramdhani Laksani the ex-JKT48 captain and now she is the JKT48 general manager. The music video and costume concept was made by request from Melody herself, which to inject it with a lot of Indonesian culture, and the result is a mix between the idol culture and Indonesian culture. Batik pattern from Madura and Bali was chosen because of its colorful characteristic. According to Genjek Pok, the colorful Batik could build a cheerful mood and match with the idol characteristic itself [15].



Fig. 5 A comparison between AKB48 and JKT48 costume for “Kimi Wa Melody”

5. Conclusion

From the case study above, we can see that although JKT48 following AKB48's brand value, but they could still do some alteration to match with their audience needs and social culture condition. Hybridity condition was found in those cases. For example, in the "Kimi Wa Melody" costume alteration, this could be a case of ambivalence, because there is two culture that mixed together but the dominant culture (in this case is the AKB48 culture or J-pop culture) have not overshadowed the secondary culture (Indonesian culture), even though they still sung the song with the same song composition as the Japanese version of "Kimi Wa Melody." Audience could still see the harmony between these two cultures from the costume and the moods that created. Therefore the ideas or strategy for a brand is should follow the target audience social culture needs. It is easier to penetrate the foreign market using the same 'language' as them and to understand them better to gain more empathy that could lead to brand loyalty.

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