Psychoanalytical Approach to Transnational Money Laundering Utilizing Japanese Mobile Online Games with Gacha System: A Forecasting Study

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ABSTRACT

The problems to face money laundering acts are the methods which the criminals are using that keeps on changing and improving along with the development of modern technology. While law enforcement mostly trying to prevent it by tampering by the technology used, there is a blind spot where there exists the reason of why and how the crime was possible in the first place. Some even neglected and underestimated by the authorities because of how the society views it in general, this is the recklessness the criminals can exploit. While money laundering utilizing Online Games, moreover with a Gacha system may sounds as bizarre as it is, it can be done and this article is intended to explain the what, why, who, and how of it. Using the Lacanian Psychoanalysis as a problem dissecting tool, the key here is to explain what makes the condition and environment where such crime is possible, involving the Otaku Subculture part of society in Japan and Indonesia, the companies behind it, and the Mobile Online Games itself. This article is forecasting the problems that will emerges concerning the crime of money laundering and its methods.

Keywords : Otaku Subculture, Money Laundering, Psychoanalysis.

INTRODUCTION

Methods of money laundering has rapidly evolved in past several years, resulting in the authorities catching up with regulations and methods to counter it. While we already realized that, with the ever developing technology, money laundering as we know it are no longer the simple act of covering the illegal source of the money. Today we know that money laundering can be conducted through the cyberspace, hence we have what we called as cyber laundering. However we are still focused on the relatively traditional and obvious method, while there are criminals conducting the act under our nose with methods we have not think of and we oversaw it. These methods are often taken too lightly as it is deemed as too ridiculous to be true thus left unobserved and exploited (Richet, 2013).

There is an emerging market of Japanese Mobile Online Games or Mobage. Even though it was intended only for the Japanese domestic market, it went worldwide due to a network of Japanese Pop Culture lovers, or the Otaku subculture in most used term as they are not exactly popular in the popular culture (Azuma, 2009; Yamakami, 2012). These Otaku subculture are spread around the globe in numerous countries, including Indonesia. The specific subculture has their own shared values and norm and are relatively the same everywhere even though they may have different nationalities and original culture, especially between Mobage players

(Okada, 2005). Even though they are no that significant in terms of popularity, the Otaku subculture can create an impact to the economy as the market of Mobage continues to grow.

Notable companies considered as giants in the Mobage industries are Cygames, DeNA, and Bandai Namco, with other companies following such as TypeMoon, DelightWorks, and Bushiroad that has entered the industry by diversification. To illustrate the size of the Mobage industry, in 2011, the company DeNA has a revenue worth of 445 million USD. Another mobile online game company, GREE, gained 2.1 billion to 2.2 billion USD in revenue (Takahashi, 2012). However, these numbers are largely contributed by one feature that exists almost exclusively in Japanese Mobages, the Gacha system (Cutler, 2012).

The Gacha system has proven to be addictive and problematic. It has driven players to binge-purchasing coins for Gacha at large amount. For example, in 2012, a player livestreamed his Gacha usage and shown he spent equal to 1131 USD in purchasing coins for Gacha (オムチキン, 2012). Some player also claimed to already purchasing up to 1,217 USD worth of coins to get the character they wanted (Nakamura, 2012). In the earlier years of its implementation, games with Gacha system has faced numerous domestic lawsuits in Japan on the case of gambling and false advertisement. One prominent case is when a middle school student was reported spending equal to 5000 USD worth of coins in a month, while another case reported a primary school student spent more than 1500 USD in three day period for the same purpose (Russell, 2012).

The cases above lead to the banning of a certain variety of Gacha system by the Japanese Consumer Affairs Agency, accusing it as a corporate fraud and false advertisement case (De Vere, 2012). As per 2012, mobile online gaming services was not regulated that much by the Japanese government. But the lawsuits has affected the economy considerably as the stock of the companies involved, GREE and DeNA, has dropped each 23.2% and 20.1% in Nikkei per May 2012 (Toto, 2012). However, not until 2016, a scandal popularly dubbed as *Monkeygate* by the community, take place on Cygames' most popular Mobage, Granblue Fantasy, where a player spent 6,065 USD worth of coins in order to get a character via Gacha System. The said player sued the company for not getting the character after spending so much money, resulting in Cygames compensated the player (Nakamura, 2016). Since then, the regulation of Mobage and Gacha has changed drastically with age restrictions on maximum purchase, daily limitations, and currency usage, as some Mobage now only accepts Japanese Yen.

Questions rise on just how effective the regulation and whether there are also exploitable loopholes that has not noticed yet. Moreover, these cases are mostly observed in Japan, not in other countries and worldwide where there are also a significant amount of Mobage players. Where in this case the writer hypothesized that money laundering can be conducted through Mobage with Gacha system as layering method. Meanwhile the Japanese authorities are still struggling with the issue, Indonesian authorities are not equipped for these issues yet. In spite of that, Otaku subculture is growing immensely in past few years as many public events regarding Otaku subculture begun to grow in numbers. Companies in the Otaku subculture industries also has begun to swarm in to Indonesia, as we have a potential emerging market.

Conversely, the loophole in regulation is not the main point on how it can be exploited for money laundering. Rather than fixating on technicalities, the writer argues that the problem lies within the culture of Otaku subculture and Mobage players itself. The writer argues that the culture itself has provided the environment and enabled the criminals to exploit it to conduct money laundering. Supported by how profitable the Japanese Mobage industry and the speed of cash flow rotation in the Gacha system, it is very possible to conduct money laundering utilizing Japanese Mobage with Gacha system.

In this article, the writer will explain about the factors that shapes the values and norms of the Otaku subculture and the actors behind it. Following is the analysis of how those values

and norms are made using Lacanian Psychoanalysis concept of Three Symbolic Order. This concept will explain the how on the problem. In the same note, the writer would also like to emphasize that problem is transnational in nature, since the origin of the Otaku subculture is Japan. Yet, similar values can be observed outside of Japan despite of different cultural or nationality background.

CONTENTS

Mobage, Gacha, and the Otaku Subculture

There are few factors need to be analysed concerning the Otaku subculture and Mobage. First of all are the internal elements of the Mobage itself, the Gacha system mechanics, and also how its players interacts with them. These factors plays a significant role in understanding how Otaku subculture behave within their subculture group, because Mobage serves as the vehicle to deliver and spread the values and norms held in Otaku subculture, in particular, those who plays it. As an example, we will use three of the top rated Japanese Mobage in the market: *Idolm@ster Cinderella Girls: Starlight Stage (Im@s CG), Granblue Fantasy (GBF)*, and *Fate/Grand Order (F/GO)*. These games has reputation for being the most played based on registered player numbers and income revenues.

First of all, we need to understand that one of the primary reason for a Mobage to be popular and influential in the series or franchise they belong to. *Im@s CG* already belonged to the *Idolm@ster* franchise developed by Bandai Namco that already existed for more than a decade, the same goes with *F/GO* that belongs to the Fate/ series developed by TypeMoon since mid-2000s. These Mobage will easily attract players as they already have an established market. Meanwhile *GBF* is a newly established series by Cygames but managed to gain player number because it belongs to the fantasy turn-based role playing games in the aspect of genre. Genre is also relatively important since *Im@s CG* still has to compete in the Rhythm game genre and *F/GO* in the turn-based RPG genre. Both of those genre is notably competitive in the market and has a significant impact to player numbers even though both games already have an established market (Raussi, 2017; Sakamoto & Nakajima, 2014).

However, there is also another aspects that precedes the established market of *Im@s CG* and *F/GO* and also plays as a significant factor on how GBF can be popular instantly, it is the visual design of the Mobage itself that distinct it from other mobile online games (Navarro-Remesal & Loriguillo-López, 2015). Otaku subculture is mainly revolves around Japanese Anime and manga that has a distinctive elements of features. A stereotypical cuteness or *Moe* aspect that incorporated in the visual design serves as one of the main attractions for the Otaku subculture to play a Mobage (Nakamura, 2012). *GBF* played this factor very well by designing their characters attractively, to the point it is borderline explicit.

Gacha system is the feature that cranked the player experience up to eleven. Gacha system is some sort of microtransaction feature in Mobage where players can buy in-game coins (or crystals, or gems, depending on the game) to use to purchase items which are generated randomly. For example, with a single purchase of 100 coins, a player can get low-value common items to items that are considered as superstar rare (SSR) and very high in value. While technically players can use the feature for free, as most games also gives free coins, many also decided to buy coins with real money to increase their chance of winning an SSR item. To keep the enormous profits from the Gacha revenue, while in the same time abiding the regulations, developers has used several methods to attract players into spending more in Gacha. There are times where SSR items or character rates will be increased, giving players more chance in getting their desired characters or items. At special occasions such as the Mobage's anniversary or New Year events, sometimes developer give away free Gacha pulls or at a heavily discounted price. Also, since the *GBF Monkeygate* scandal in 2016, Mobage

developers has equipped their games with special feature where you can get special items that could be redeemed with SSR characters or items at an amount. For example, in *GBF*, whenever you use Gacha you will receive "Cerulean Sparks", which can be exchanged at certain amounts with desired SSR weapons and character. This method is known as "Sparking" and the term is sometimes used colloquially in some communities even outside of *GBF*.

There are also some technical mechanics that affects the behaviour of Mobage players. Players can play Mobage by simply downloading and installing it without registering accounts. Some players did not bothered with this, but some players decided to register their accounts with their emails for data backups since changing device or uninstalling the game will wipe out all the data and achievements. In *GBF*, players can also make and join "guilds" or "crew" where they can team up and fights other crews in a certain in-game events. In *Im@s CG*, a mechanic is added for players to play a song together in collaboration. Aside from adding the experience value, these mechanics also shaped how players interacts with each other.

The Actors: Players and Corporates

The Otaku subculture is not limited to the Otaku themselves, but also the companies behind it. However, governments are strictly excluded in this aspect since they did not do any relevant acts in directing the Otaku subculture in this context aside of the regulations and economic interests (Todd, 2011). The same also applied to the Indonesian government, as per this research is conducted, there are little attention given to this specific subculture (Djelantik, et al., 2016). Aside from that, non-governmental actors are proven to significantly shape the subculture due to the current neoliberalistic trend of economic system, where governmental actors has very little to do in shaping the market (Dean, 2014).

Games needs players. Perhaps, the most important actors in the Mobage industry is the consumer itself: the players. This is because the companies in the Mobage or Otaku subculture industries in general are very consumer oriented, different from other companies that are corporate oriented (Takata, 2016). As depicted in earlier part of this article, players can affect the fluctuation of the market and stocks, making the industry is very derived by the consumer's behaviour (Choi, et al., 1998).

The demographic of Mobage players is very wide. It ranges in age from elementary schooler to a middle-aged adult, occupations whether they are unemployed or a CEO of a company. Though, the demographic is concentrated in the range of teens to young-adults. It is also obvious that the players have access to internet and knowledgeable in operating smartphones. For those who lived outside Japan, it is also safe to assume that they are knowledgeable about Japanese culture and language, since the majority of Mobage is in Japanese and does not have English versions. In terms of economic, some players in lower economic classes would still be able to play Mobage for free with lower-end smartphones and affordable data plan. However, there are players who are in higher economic class that have access to credit cards and the affordability to do foreign financial transaction for those who lived outside of Japan (Kaloka, 2017).

The corporates of the industry played their own part of shaping the culture. Developers who are the front end of the Mobage services that interacts directly with players. Developers are also the ones that able to directly tamper with the game's mechanism, including to know loopholes in the system. The publishers and distributor who publish the game and acts as the middleman between and the one who has the fastest cash flow, since many also acts as the merchant of in-game coins for Gacha. And the copyright holder, the corporate giants that holds the copyright of a series or franchise. The copyright holder corporates are also the one who has the authority to produce supplementary products such as art books, merchandise, hosting events,

and even adapting the Mobage into other media such as Anime or Manga. Even though they hold special authorities, consider that they can also be actively playing the Mobage as players.

Lacan's Three Symbolic Order of the Otaku Subculture and their Exploits

In Lacanian Psychoanalysis, the concept of Three Symbolic Orders illustrates the behaviour of individuals or a group, those are: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Imaginary reflects the desire of a person, anything that a person longed for in their life. The Symbolic is the actions, values, norms, and other aspects that the person does in order to achieve their desire. And the Real is the objective reality that exists independently, in which no one will ever achieve. Because that person will never achieve the Real, the person will stuck in their Imaginary, and doing their Symbolic actions, making it an endless circle (Leader & Groves, 2000; Zizek, 1992). This Three Symbolic Orders directly created values and norms in a culture (Zizek, 1989). While Lacan was talking about culture in general, it is also applicable to popular culture (Zizek, 2001).

In this case, the members of Otaku subculture each has their own individual Imaginary desires that has collectively integrates. It can be anything from social status, joy, lust, or anything else. Mobage players also have this, and with the availability of Gacha system, it became their Symbolic actions. By using the Gacha system it gave them a sense of fulfilment in achieving their desires. However as per the Real, they will never achieve their truest desires and will be left unsatisfied. This repeats the process, in which can explain why the case of binging on Gacha is common for players who are particular in their desires and have the means to it.

The Imaginary lies within the Mobage aspects, whether it's from visual design, the popularity of franchise or series, or the genre of the Mobage. The Symbolic is when they are using the Gacha system, moreover when they actually spend money to use it. While the Real, where their desire resides, is beyond their reach, will resulting in players repeating the cycle. The interaction among players and how the companies exploits it for profits adds the fuel to this cycle. This is the very core on how Mobage with Gacha system can be very exploitative.

Money launderers can exploit the behaviour of Mobage players and the immense amount of cash flow in Gacha transaction. One of the way to do it by investing in farming account practices where an individual or a group played multiple Mobage accounts simultaneously to farm SSR items or character, thus making the account very high in value. These high value accounts then can be sold or auctioned online, often at very high price. This process may took time, but with funds to purchase coins for Gacha, it can be shortened significantly. The layering is also pretty complex since it involves multiple parties, including but not limited to: the farmer players, banks and financial services companies, publishers and distributors, and of course the companies that develop or own the Mobage itself. A related study has discussed about this (Kaloka, 2017).

Another problem that makes this method exploitable is that the value of Mobage or any Otaku subculture subjects in general are very subjective and unpredictable. Common people would probably never guess that a high-value Mobage account can cost up to Rp 1.000.000,-. The subjectivity of value is what makes it hard to guess the amount of money went through on the layering process of money laundering.

CONCLUSION

It is plausible to conduct money laundering using Mobage with Gacha system due to the behaviour of the players and the community around it. However, the possibility is still unmeasurable due to no observable cases to study yet, as per the research is conducted, at least not the ones that has brought up to public. Yet, judging from the environment that enables such

acts, the possibility still exists. When an observable case appear in the future, a further study is needed.

Underestimation is what makes us swindled on. Even though the probability of this method is still questionable since there are yet of any observable cases, we still need to put it into consideration. At this point, research and development is what we can do to catch up with how money laundering methods has developed. Since this has to do with how a certain group behaves, a sociological approach might be needed. With that we can develop further regulations, not only to combat money laundering but also to protect those who are within the group. However, the writer is strongly discourage an excess of regulation regarding this matter.

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