CHAPTER 5.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

LEVERAGING PLATFORMS FOR MARGINZALIZED VOICES IN ESPORTS
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ABSTRACT

Romnie (2019) identified 6 main barriers for minorities to enter into esports as competitors, and Romnie encourages women's tournaments as a way for players to get exposure to teams in a safe environment; however, tournaments are intended to be a first step, and what comes next is more difficult and nuanced to identify. One potential avenue is to use various social media platforms to advocate for minorities who compete and work in esports.

This paper presents a preliminary study examining how Twitter and podcasts are used to advocate for inclusion, community, and support for those pursuing a career in esports. I will focus on how two groups use Twitter to promote their organizations and examine a podcast featuring competitive female/non-binary Hearthstone players. Based on preliminary findings, I compare and contrast the differences in the two platforms and hypothesize that podcasts offer a unique and focused avenue for advocacy.

Introduction

As games media and games studies has shifted focus to issues of representation in the games industry and in esports, women's

esports tournaments are more important than ever. As Romnie (2019) describes, there are six barriers to entry for women into esports: gatekeeping through stereotyping; general harassment in public gaming spaces; fear of tokenism at tournaments; harassment through Twitch chat while competing; women being seen as risky investments by team leadership and owners; and a lack of role models, which leads to fewer women entering into competitions. Romnie also states that players of color (POCs), LGBTQ+, and gamers with disabilities face similar barriers as well. As a first step to help break these barriers, she encourages women's competitions as a way to provide a safe and comfortable environment that also showcases their talent and potential.

But because women's tournaments are a first step, what comes next? In this paper, I present preliminary research that shows social media platforms are a possible next step for player promotion, inclusion, and community that helps provide networking and support, as well as continuing to promote player skills and value. Specifically, I examine the Twitter profiles for Black Girl Gamers and Women of Esports and perform a word analysis for a year's worth of tweets to determine common themes between the groups.

Then, I examine the *Hearthstone* podcast Coin Concede episode "B8: Women in Gaming" as a second platform for visibility and engagement. The women and non-binary people featured in this podcast are all serious competitors, and one is a dedicated broadcaster in the *Hearthstone* esports community. Lastly, I compare similar terms from the podcast to the Twitter data to identify commonalities and differences between the ways the two platforms advocate for women, POCs, and gender non-conforming people in esports. My goal with this research is to present new avenues for research to help continue the conversation of how to break down barriers for minorities in esports.

Literature Review

Twitter is well researched for various interactions online, so in this review I focus on knowledge sharing and social capital. Cao et al (2015) argue that "social media, functioning as social networking tools as well as informal KMS [knowledge management systems], reflects the relational, collaborative nature required by knowledge integration" (p.352). Additionally, "shared language is found to be the strongest predictor of knowledge integration in our research, followed by trust" (p.352). This supports the importance of perceptions of community on social media platforms. The previous study compliments Panahi et al's (2015) study on the generation of tacit knowledge in social media. Tacit knowledge is defined as "knowledge that is highly personal and difficult to articulate completely" (p.3). They found that social media enables people to find explicit knowledge quickly, which then opens spaces for tacit knowledge sharing: "the more people encounter new explicit information on social media the more new tacit knowledge they may create" (p.9).

While studies on podcasts mostly focus on their uses as educational tools, there are a few studies that discuss knowledge sharing, community, and advocacy through the platform. Byszewski et al. (2017) discuss how a podcast on a career in geriatric medicine raised notable interest for the field especially when listeners were "unsubscribed", and that "[the podcast] can serve as a novel multimedia approach" (p.5). Another study on podcasts found that "respondents broadly perceive the act of listening to the MIHH [Mental Illness Happy Hour] podcast as being responsible for positive attitude changes towards the presence and treatment of MI [Mental Illness] in both others and the self" (Nathan, 2018, p.19). Both of these studies support the reasoning that podcasts, though not considered to be traditional social media platforms, can also have the same tacit

knowledge sharing, shared vocabulary, and trust amongst podcast hosts and listeners.

Preliminary Study and Methods

First, I will briefly describe each group that I studied, and then describe my research methods and limitations.

Groups of Study

Black Girl Gamers is an "online platform-based community that aims to positively promote diversity and affect change within the gaming industry." In addition to their Twitter presence, the have a Twitch stream and speak at conference panels and other events. Recently they participated in the XO Academy: A Fighting Game Bootcamp, a 4-week program event focused on fighting game esports and women in the Fighting Game Community (FCG). Both Black Girl Gamers and XO Academy are affiliates of esports advocacy group AnyKey.

Women of Esports (WoE) "empowers women in the esports industry through our global community and mentorship program." The group has over 450 members and a mentorship program that provides guidance and support to female/non-binary esports athletes. They also have a private discord channel for members.

Coin Concede: A *Hearthstone* Podcast was founded in 2015 and discusses "news in the scene, tournament results and highlights, and Decksplanations breakdowns covering topics both general and specific." Notably, the podcast was founded by Cora "Songbird" Georgiou, who is the first, and highly successful, female *Hearthstone* esports broadcaster. The episode I examine for this study is "B8: Women in Gaming", featuring female/non-binary esports competitors and casters Edelweiss, Teebs, Nicholena, and SongbirdCora.

WSOE (World Showdown of Esports) hosts various types of

esports tournaments. In December 2018 and in March 2019 WSOE hosted two all-female/non-binary *Hearthstone* tournaments. I originally included this group as part of the Twitter study but ended up omitting the data because I incorrectly thought the podcast episode was in direct response to the tournament. I do reference the WSOE data in the Discussion, which is why I mention them here.

Methods

Using Crimson Hexagon, I pulled a year's worth of tweets from Twitter from July 7, 2018 to July 7 2019. I then exported the data and created an Excel spreadsheet where I could study the word frequencies and occurrences across the groups. I did not scrub the raw data of stop words or variations of the same word–i.e., gaming, game–but I did take these idiosyncrasies into account when analyzing the data. Then, I listened and downloaded the podcast and ran the MP3 file through a transcript program. The program outputted a text file of the transcript and I used Antconc to create a term occurrence list and compare it to the Twitter terms.

First, I identified the terms that all three groups had in common (WSOE was included in this part of the study). Next, I looked at the top 50 occurrences for at least two groups. Then, I looked at the podcast data separately. Since this was a much smaller data set (2 hours), I felt it was important to examine this data on its own.

After examining the data sets, I realized the podcast had some common terms with WSOE, but they were much lower on WSOE's occurrence list, so it was not enough to make a significant impact in the analysis. At that point, I decided to omit the WSOE data from the study.

The main limitation of the study is that the study is very small and only captures a year's worth of data for the Twitter groups.

While this is a small sample size, it was enough data for the preliminary study.

Preliminary Findings

First, I will discuss the Twitter word analysis, which will then lead into the term analysis for the podcast.

Twitter Term Analysis

Terms that all three groups use (Top 3 Terms) are gender related (women, female), socially oriented (community, chat), support based (thank, feel, amazing), or play related (playing games).

Word	Black Girl Gamers Word Frequency	Women of Esports Word Frequency	Coin Concede Word Frequency	Total Occurrences
women	70	556	97	723
gaming	149	10	13	172
community	29	93	27	149
games	42	62	22	126
work	19	67	10	96
woman	23	26	38	87
play	14	9	64	87
female	12	49	25	86
thank	42	19	17	78
feel	16	9	38	63
playing	7	7	48	62
great	11	24	13	48
event	15	12	13	40
best	12	14	13	39
everyone	16	12	10	38
chat	13	7	17	37
understand	13	7	9	29
amazing	18	163	3	184

Figure 1: Terms used by all 3 groups

For the top 50 term occurrences that were used by at least 2 groups (Top 50+2), Black Girl Gamers and Women of Esports had almost all the most dual occurrences of specific terms.

Word	Black Girl Gamers Word Frequency	Women of Esports Word Frequency	Coin Concede Word Frequency	Total Occurrences
please	10	192	0	202
🙌	172	16	0	188
today	21	121	0	142
😅	118	8	0	126
people	70	49	0	119
support	28	88	0	116
level	0	92	12	104
industry	29	72	0	101
💙	11	83	0	94
game	76	11	0	87
stream	47	0	36	83
players	0	8	70	78
new	13	63	0	76
better	58	9	0	67
join	20	47	0	67
help	16	50	0	66
need	49	16	0	65
happy	25	38	0	63
right	34	29	0	63
love	29	31	0	60
good	39	14	0	53

Figure 2: Top 50 Occurrence Terms used at least 2 groups

The top 20 term occurrences for the podcast are a mix of gender terms (woman, non-binary, female) and competition related terms (tournaments, league, competitive (16 occurrences), compete (15 occurrences)).

Word	Coin Concede Word Frequency
women	97
players	70
play	64
hearthstone	64
time	57
playing	48
woman	38
feel	38
stream	36
tournaments	36
game	33
issues	28
community	27
female	25
games	22
league	20
non binary	20

Figure 3: Top 20 Occurrence Terms used by Podcast

Discussion

The highest frequency of terms for Black Girl Gamers and Women of Esports tended to focus on sentiments of

encouragement, support, and positive reinforcement: "industry", "help", "support", "community", "amazing". The Coin Concede Podcast was the only group to specifically focus on esports related terms, such as "compete" and "tournament" and was the only group to mention "non-binary". All three groups mentioned gender related terms, such as "women" and "female", as well as terms related to Twitch, such as "chat" and stream".

The Twitter groups, Black Girl Gamers and Women of Esports, appear to be more focused on community involvement and general support, whereas the Coin Concede podcast was specifically focused on female/non-binary experiences in competitive *Hearthstone*. The Twitter findings supports Cao et al's (2015) study, which also showed that users choose to engage with knowledge on social media platforms before information sharing can occur (p.352). This indicates that for both groups, the Twitter presence may be used for different purposes than the core mission for each group. Black Girl Gamers frequently tweets memes, articles, cosplay posts, etc., and is focused on social and community interactions, rather than focusing solely on the events and conferences they attend. Women of Esports is similar in that the account focuses on promoting their organization socially, rather than emphasizing the mentorship, which is at the core of their website.

The podcast supports ideas of knowledge sharing, shared vocabulary, and trust in various ways. There were many topics and issues specific to *Hearthstone* that would confuse listeners not familiar with the esports scene. For example, the driving motivator for the special episode was in reaction to only one woman getting an invitational spot intended for community members and influencers (out of 48 total spots), despite many women and non-binary influencers present in the Hearthstone esports community. Listeners who follow Hearthstone esports will be familiar with this invitational and the controversy on Twitter that followed. Through a shared vocabulary, the guests

demonstrated their expertise and shared barriers specific to the game, such as difficulty finding practice playgroups, a common practice among competitive Hearthstone players. The podcast uniquely allows the tacit knowledge of these people to come together and deliver it to a specific audience who are already invested in Hearthstone esports. This allows for a targeted way of advocating for women/non-binary people in a specific context. I was unable to gauge the reactions to the podcast, but the host, Ridiculous Hat, mentioned the guests brought up problems, barriers, and issues that he, as a cis, white, male, never considered. I hypothesize that reactions and emails in response to the podcast from the same demographic would support these sentiments. This would support Nathan and Byszewski et al's findings on the positive influence podcasts can have on listeners.

While I omitted WSOE from the main study, I do want to bring up an interesting finding I discovered after analyzing the initial Twitter data. Despite WSOE hosting two all-women/non-binary tournaments in the data timeframe, the terms "women" and "female" are not used by WSOE at all. This signals what Romine and the guests on Coin Concede discuss as a primary goal for inclusion of minorities in esports: to be treated equally as competitors. Through WSOE marketing the tournament as a competitive invitational event without mentioning that it's an exclusive women/non-binary tournament brings justification to the fact that these people are serious competitors. Additionally, the WSOE5 tournament featured exhibition matches from some of Hearthstone's most popular competitive figures, such as Amnesiac, and top casting talent with Frodan and Firebat. Due to the Hearthstone celebrities at this tournament, I infer that this led to the tournament being featured in the Blizzard Launcher for all PC Hearthstone players to see before opening the game. By not emphasizing the fact that it was a women's tournament and supporting the event with other popular

community figures, the tournament overall was presented as a serious competitive event.

Conclusion

In this preliminary study, I determined that Black Girl Gamers and Women of Esports uses Twitter as a platform for social and community engagement. The Coin Concede podcast offered a concentrated and contextual platform for knowledge sharing, supported by a shared language and the trust of the listeners. This allowed the podcast to call attention to the expertise and skillful women/non-binary players in Hearthstone esports. Both platforms are effective at outreach, but their audiences and goals differ between the platforms.

To continue this research, I would like to focus on *Hearthstone* podcasts and survey all the major podcasts to determine if/how they discuss issues of gender and marginalization within the Hearthstone esports community and the responses they receive from listeners when they do discuss these issues. While Twitter was a good starting point for this study, as a platform, Twitter is well researched and documented as having a wide influence on social issues.

For future research, I recommend pursuing more publications on how podcasting can reach and advocate for marginalized groups in gaming communities. Podcasts in gaming communities are a unique form of content creation, and differ from traditional, highly polished and produced forms of podcasting. Many gaming podcasts are streamed on Twitch and offer live interactions and reactions from chat, in addition to reaching to a very specific audience. I believe there is an interesting potential for podcasting to be an interesting avenue for advocacy within specific gaming communities, as I found through this preliminary study.

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