

Megathreads and ‘waifu wars’: A structural content analysis of r/persona5 as a community of practice

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Abstract

Communities of practice dedicated to video game fandoms are not uncommon, and extant literature has examined how video game media continues to emerge in global popularity. The current study examines the dominant discourse within a community dedicated to the game *Persona 5*, which has expanded beyond its initial niche into a larger transmedia phenomenon. In this study, we excavate the *Persona 5* Reddit fandom to identify and extract themes within the group conversations to better understand how niche games and fandoms navigate growth into the larger mainstream. Methodologically, the full data corpus was extracted and analyzed using a computational content analysis. Our findings revealed that discourse was structured through three levels: moderation in the community, gameplay, and fandom surrounding the game. We suggest implications for future research, such as understanding contemporary fandoms through COPs and digital spaces, and acknowledging the dominant role of community infrastructure and metatextual discourse in fandom spaces.

Keywords: communities of practice, transmedia fandom, fan communities, computational content analysis

Introduction

Communities of practice (COPs) online are nuanced spaces where users can collectively communicate about and engage in developing their own rules, sanctions, and governance surrounding a common interest. For niche online communities, COPs, especially in the context of transmedia (Jenkins, 2003), increasingly represent spaces where users can engage as they move beyond traditional face-to-face boundaries. In contemporary COPs dedicated to online fandoms, participants help contribute to the groups, reconfiguring how both COPs are understood and various media are produced; they share opinions and knowledge, and operate based on their prior experiences with media. Scholarship has documented how COPs have operated as digital fandoms that produce knowledge and facilitate community organizing, building what eventually become shared histories within the fandom (Wenger, 1998), and more recently, scholars have investigated video gaming fandoms through the lens of COPs (Marlatt, 2020; Richard & Gray, 2018).

Among the games that have risen to global prominence in the last few years, *Persona 5* (Atlus, 2016) has extended the popularity of its franchise into a transmedia phenomenon that greatly exceeds its initial, niche, fanbase. *Persona 5* has recently seen an expanded reboot, multiple spinoff games, live shows, and crossovers with other popular games and media. As a result, *Persona 5*'s online fanbase is uniquely situated across cultures and platforms. This study uses *Persona 5*'s online fandom on Reddit as a case study in the community structures and discursive complexity of transmedia fandom, noting specifically how the niche online community has structurally positioned itself to accommodate its growth.

Through the lens of COP, this study examines how structures, moderation, and group expectations shaped the discourse among the increasingly disparate audience of the *Persona 5* Reddit fandom. The study used a computational content analysis of the *Persona 5* Reddit, *r/persona5*, to identify and extract the themes within the conversations, finding three core levels of discourse, characterized through structures, outlining how users dominantly communicated at three stratified levels: 1) community infrastructure and metatextual discourse, 2) gameplay, and 3) the fandom surrounding the game itself. These thematic layers were strongly hierarchical, with the metatextual layer of moderation supporting the gameplay and fandom layers of discourse, which we then used to revisit the research question as a whole and guide our understanding of the subreddit. We found that as the fandom expanded alongside the *Persona 5* franchise, the community on Reddit had reacted to the influx of newcomers with increased layers of moderation. This metatextual layer consisting of moderation, rules, and structure was at the heart of the discourse; an overwhelming amount of the discussion within the fandom was directly related to organizational discussions *about* the conversation. We found that themes more directly related to fan performance (such as gameplay and character discussions) were only made possible by the essential support of a strong community infrastructural layer. By unpacking,

through the lens of COPs, how fans of a game like *Persona 5* converge on Reddit (to contribute their narratives, perspectives, and offer collaboration online), this study provides a generalizable roadmap for understanding how a previously “niche” title emerges into the mainstream, thus reshaping the fandom, communal participation, and the structure of discourse.

Communities of practice and online fandoms

Communities of practice, defined by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), are described as groups of people who share an interest or passion and interact regularly about it. COPs are typically groups that operate within a shared space that provide a sense of common ground, identity, and create a social environment for learning within that community through frameworks, information, stories, and other documents. They might be groups that exist in physical settings, but also exist in virtual locations, and have the capacity to evolve over time (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, COPs must leverage shared interests to develop norms and structures that help the group to survive (Wenger, 1998). Practices within COPs can be amplified in digital spaces, especially those that might resonate among online fans, given that they are based in shared passions, communication, and collaboration, as fandom participants have long created online spaces to host fan works as platforms have developed and migrated (Fiesler & Dym, 2020). In digital spaces, and in a growing body of research dedicated to transmedia and the role of communication in new media technologies, the role of users sharing their experiences in a community can reveal complexities of those experiences, community development, and personal narratives that develop (Hancox, 2017). Recently, studies of online fandoms have drawn greater attention to the role of fan labor (De Kosnik, 2016; Stanfill, 2019) and structural actors in driving community engagement (Berge & Britt, 2021). We focus specifically on the unique role of metatextual discourse, which facilitates both fan participation and labor.

COPs have been observed in a range of topical contexts: as virtual communities to improve interprofessional collaboration and education (McLoughlin, Patel, O’Callaghan, & Reeves, 2018); within the use of collaborative technologies, enabling sustainable healthcare through eHealth and telemedicine (Sims, 2018); as faculty COPs focused on STEM reform (Gehrke & Kezar, 2019); as knowledge-sharing domains within business organizations to examine barriers, solutions, and influential factors to improve organizational outcomes (Aljuwaiber, 2016). Within the purview of online fandoms, the context of online trolling behaviors have been examined, specifically in regards to management and governance of online communities (Cruz, Seo, & Rex, 2018), interactions between male-dominated cult fandoms and discourse surrounding the show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (Kirkland, 2020), and tumblr youth subcultures (McCracken, 2017). Although fandom is often associated with toxicity (Stanfill, 2020), fans perform important meaning-making that has the potential to reclaim and reimagine established media (Berge & Britt, 2021).

Studies of COPs and fandom have long been intertwined. Rokka's (2010) scholarship of online fandoms notes the role of branding, images, and management within communities— helping to understand consumer culture, purchasing, and organizational behaviors. Scholarship of online communities is derived from a longstanding body of work (e.g., *The Networked Nation* by Hiltz & Turnoff, 1978), while scholars like Rheingold (1993) helped to pioneer the term 'online community' that in numerous studies, has described the camaraderie and support observed among people in a shared online space (e.g., Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005). In the context of online fandoms, such as in examples such as *r/persona5*, fans represent a unique group of users who are motivated to seek and interact with online content related to the larger media itself, whether to express their attachment to the narrative, characters, to share fan art, fiction, or interact with other fans that come from an array of perspectives and backgrounds (Costello & Moore, 2007).

Within the last decade, online fandoms have emerged related to games as well as *otaku* culture have become popularized globally (Vargaz-Barraza, Gaytan-Cortez, & Gutierrez-Zepeda, 2013), it is unsurprising that communities of practice have emerged around brands (e.g., subreddits such as *r/falcom*, a Japanese video game developer), specific game series (e.g., *r/fireblem*) or titles, such as the case of *r/persona5*. Importantly, online fandoms surrounding the way fans make sense of media have also been researched. Studies have examined the conscious efforts that fans have made to create spaces to discuss and reimagine media, such as organizing conventions (McKevitt, 2010) in communities based on *gacha* (capsule toy) games (Britt & Britt, 2020), and in the cultural dynamics of doujinshi (fan comics) and in creating cosplay in Japan, the USA, and Europe (Lamerichs, 2013). In a related context, studies have examined how fan fiction surrounding Japanese media serves as a conduit for increasing connectivity among fandoms surrounding a given title (Santilli, 2010). DeKosnik likewise points out the role of moderators in building fanfiction archives, arguing that "techno-volunteers have managed to archive online cultural production through developing archival *repertoires*, that is, through practices and ways of doing that are passed from person to person" (DeKosnik, 2016, p. 54). In this case, we found strong evidence to support this idea that the community actors were largely responsible for shaping participation within the community—especially as its audience shifted over time. While it is recognized that fans will come together to seek community within these spaces, and that these media have increased in popularity, the ways in which the themes of these communities surrounding video game titles unfold is beginning to be understood. To explicate this dynamic, the present study explores the dominant themes expressed by participants of the *r/persona5* subreddit (titled: P5R - Persona 5 - ペルソナ5 ザ・ロイヤル).

Users who participate in *r/persona5* communicate about titles relating to *Persona 5* and *Persona 5 Royal*, games that are part of the larger *Persona* series. In the context of Reddit, a well-known online content-sharing and discussion site comprising smaller, user-generated communities of interest called subreddits (Vella, 2015), users participate in communities of practice where both popular and niche interests are often well-represented.

Users post content in the form of text, images, videos, among other media, and they can comment and upvote or downvote posts. Today, Reddit is self-described as “The front page of the Internet” (*Reddit - Dive into Anything*). In the context of COPs, and in the exchange of knowledge production, these factors may be particularly of interest in a community surrounding a single title of a larger series.

Persona 5 as an example of transmedia fandom

Numerous scholars have explored the communicative dynamics of online spaces (Jenkins, 2006; King, 2008; Yuan, 2013), explaining how membership structures within groups evolve over time, but can become organized as spaces where members find a place that encompasses their identity surrounding that community. The way culture is described in this context is within a social structure of an existing community (King, 2008). This reflects how participants within an online fandom tend to refer to attitudes, values, knowledge production (Alexanyan, Matei, & Russell, 2015), which emerge and are co-created within the community, similar to prior scholarly approaches to examining culture (King, 2008). However, we also must acknowledge that cultural institutions reinforced through the very context of the game through which this COP is created around (a Japanese game), must be part of this community in some aspect. This is especially true in the case of a digital, online group dedicated to a fandom, where pseudonyms, avatars and other media are used to represent the link between members (e.g., Downing, 2011). Jenkins’ (2006) work on the role of media convergence examined how online forums and groups played a substantial role in the popularity of the television show *Survivor*. These notions have also given way to scholarship that has explored how online communities might serve to disinhibit fears associated with communication that would otherwise appear in a face-to-face context (Suler, 2005), such as those who participate in online communities dedicated to unmet health needs (Lee & Hawkins, 2010). For instance, studies of online fan communities of TV programs have examined how meaning making is negotiated as fans interact with the media and make sense of it within the group (Costello & Moore, 2007). Importantly for our study, scholars who have focused on games through the lens of COPs have investigated inter-community learning and discourse within “interest-driven guilds, clans, and affinity spaces, more specifically” (Richard & Gray, 2018).

All told, *Persona 5* and its community are part of a larger transmedia fandom orbiting the *Persona* franchise. Similar to its predecessor titles, particularly *Persona 3* and *Persona 4*, *Persona 5* is rooted in a narrative that takes place over the course of a year. Players take on the role of an unnamed high school student, a silent protagonist, who becomes the leader of a group that becomes known as the ‘Phantom Thieves of Hearts’ who seek to change the hearts of criminals in Japan. Like prior *Persona* entries, the game has a day-night cycle with weather changes that affect minor game mechanics, and the protagonist can form relationships with other characters—both those in the party and minor characters—similar

to dating simulation games. The *Persona* games have trademark settings in Japanese high schools and share key elements, such as fantasy themes, anime-manga character designs, a linear narrative structure, and a turn-based battle system. In *Persona 5*, for instance, the party travels between the main world—coping with everyday problems—in Japan and a dungeon-crawling fantasy otherworld known as the metaverse. The logic of the core gameplay loop (consistent through the series) takes players between the highly exploratory mode of the metaverse and the organized, high-school living outside, requiring players to make meaning of unknown and otherwise fantastical elements and reflect on the exploration process. The games and their commercial success have given way to the aforementioned game merchandise, in addition to fans of the series creating cosplay (e.g., McKevitt, 2010), developing fan-oriented media, such as art and fiction (Annett, 2014), through participation in online communities.

The games have cultural roots in Japanese settings, with *Persona 5* holding references that many English-speaking players may not recognize. Like the other *Persona* games, *Persona 5* achieved commercial success, serving as the basis for an anime adaptation, a reboot, *Persona 5: Royal* (Atlus, 2020), spinoffs including *Persona Q2* (in which characters from *Persona 3* and *4* likewise appear), *Persona 5: Dancing in Starlight*; *Persona 5 Scramble: The Phantom Strikers*, a live stage production in Japan, and a manga series, among others. But unlike its predecessors, *Persona 5* received additional support through crossovers with popular games outside of the usual audience, such as *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Nintendo, 2018) and mobile game *AFK Arena* (Lilith Games, 2019). These crossovers expanded not only *Persona's* reach into new franchises, but also its platform-specific audiences: the appearance of the protagonist, Joker, in *Smash Bros.* was his first appearance on the Nintendo Switch, which was followed by a Switch release of *Phantom Strikers*. As *Persona* was formerly exclusive to PlayStation systems, this meant a greater broadening of the franchise across games, platforms, and media.

Users opt-in to a COP, such as *r/persona5*, choosing to engage with others, bringing in their own values, ideas, and may subsequently develop a shared history through participation in that space. But as the transmedia fandom for *Persona 5* expands to include new members garnered by its popularity across other media, the *r/persona5* community provides a case study for a rapidly expanding, transmedia COP, and the dynamic of a formerly 'niche' group addressing its newly mainstream audience. This study explored how the discourse of the *r/persona5* subreddit was shaped by its themes, and how this motivated its complexly niche-but-popular, multinational fandom. In our initial exploration of the *r/persona5* COP, we sought to explore the broad thematic structures of the subreddit, finding that the community infrastructure and metatextual discourse as a whole served to shape the overarching clusters affordances for interacting with each other. As such, we then revisited our initial questions, the lens of COP, and study design, ultimately reshaping the research question with the lens of metatextual discourse at the forefront, helping to understand the community as a whole. The research question we present, then, helps to provide findings that further the work of online fandom scholarship that showcase the

stratified clusters shaping affordances for interacting with the discourse that ultimately rely on the layer of metatextual discussions. Below, we present the following research question:

RQ: How does community infrastructure and metatextual discourse shape fan communication and the discursive themes in the *r/persona5* subreddit?

Study Design

Initially, we set out to explore the thematic structures of the subreddit with attention to fan participation and labor, noting how discussions surrounding Persona 5 emerged. Through the computational analysis, we quickly discovered the dominant role of community infrastructure and metatextual discourse and focused on the present research question to better situate and understand the broader ways in which the group functioned. With this in mind, we used Crimson Hexagon and Leximancer to perform further analysis to examine closely the role of metatextual conversations and other fan discussions in the subreddit.

Collection of posts and comments

Crimson Hexagon (2019; now Brandwatch), a subscription-based library where individuals can download historical social media posts, was used to perform data collection. All posts and comments made to the *r/persona5* subreddit were collected from its inception on November 26, 2012, to December 5, 2019 ($n= 10,783$). This includes the textual content of each post and comment as well as metadata. Only the post title and comments were used as inclusion criteria for data analysis.

Generating and analyzing the concept map

To address the research question, a concept map was generated based on the themes that emerged in the subreddit. Leximancer is text analysis software that performs topic modeling— computationally grouping linked subjects and providing data and visualizations. Leximancer was used to conduct a computational content analysis of the conceptual phenomena that emerged in the data, based on the word co-occurrence from data observations and extractions in the text (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). While computational analyses provides a limited perspective of fan participation, such an approach allows for a longitudinal glimpse into the larger structures of fan engagement. In our case, performing a computational analysis assisted us in examining larger thematic clusters and patterns not readily visible by traditional textual analysis.

The data were uploaded to the Leximancer control panel using two-sentence blocks and were clustered into levels of themes based on the length of text segments (words and sentences), which is a typical procedure in analyzing content in the software (Cretchley, Gallois, Chenery, & Smith, 2010; Smith & Humphreys, 2006). The concept map presents the analysis of the text in a visual manner, including the themes and associated concepts (Figure 1). The relative position of the circles, the position of the themes (colored text) and smaller text (concepts) indicates the strength of their semantic connections in their relationships (Leximancer, n.d.). The visual size of the circles and terms do not necessarily indicate the importance of a theme but provide greater comprehension of the data.

The concept map in Figure 1 displays distinct themes that warranted further interpretation of *r/persona5*, though it is also important to examine how these themes cluster into concepts that guide conversation among participants. In this case, the concept map was reduced to three meaningful clusters that were structured in a hierarchy of topics that emerged, with each cluster representing unique conversation topics. The color of themes represents the importance of the number of times that a given concept appears within the data. Dominant themes are represented in red, with colors shifting in prominence to orange, to yellow, green, blue, and indigo, and violet, the least prominent theme. In the case of this subreddit, *moderators* was the most prominent theme (with many concepts that coalesced around it), and *PS* (short for PlayStation) as the least.

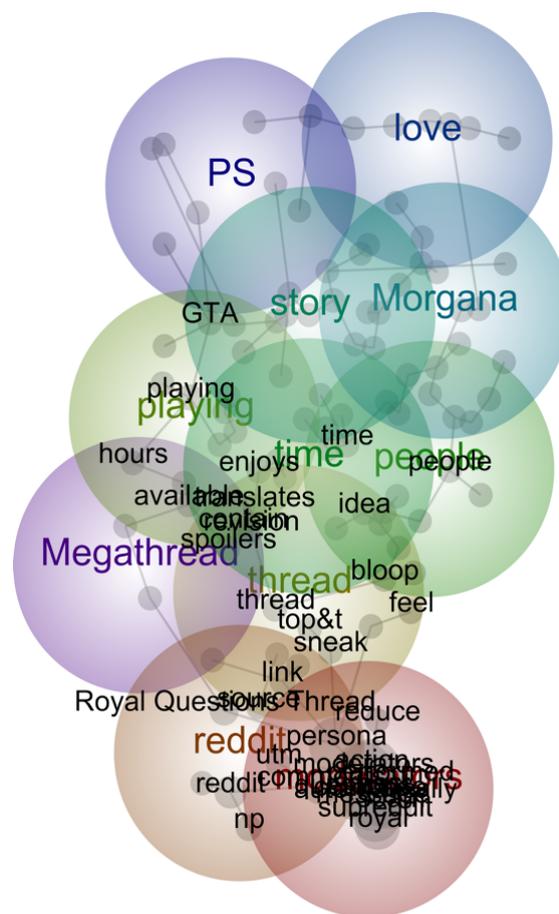


Figure 1. Concept map indicating the structure of themes and their associated concepts from r/persona5. (Note: Concepts include: *PS* [purple], *love* [indigo], *story* [teal], *Morgana* [blue], *playing* [yellow], *time* [green], *people* [chartreuse], *Megathread* [pink], *thread* [amber], *reddit* [orange], and *moderators* [red]).

General structure of discursive practices in r/persona5

The findings in this study centered around three central thematic clusters, largely organized in a stratified manner:

1. Community infrastructure and metatextual conversations (Red, Orange, and Yellow; *Moderators, Reddit, Thread, Megathread*)
2. Gameplay conversations (Green and Green-Yellow; *People, Playing, Time*)
3. Fandom-centric discourse (Blue, Indigo, and Violet; *Story, Morgana, PS, Love*).

These groupings varied in their prominence, with Red and Orange themes being the most common and Violet and Indigo themes being less common. As such, themes of moderation were the most common in the sample, followed by themes of gameplay, and fandom-centric discourse being least common. The importance of these thematic clusters, even those that were less prominent, served to make sense of the community's conversations, while the most prominent discourse centered on community infrastructure and organized the groundwork for the group.

These thematic clusters contained lower-level themes that represented topics within the community (see Figure 1). Below, each of the major thematic clusters are described in greater detail.

Community infrastructure and metatextual conversations

The dominant theme within the broad conversations surrounding the community included distinct themes surrounding community infrastructure. These served to be the most prominent in the sample, and it is useful to examine how that infrastructure subsequently coalesced into thematic clusters themselves. The first, and dominant level of conversations of infrastructure, included conversations surrounding moderation, with themes associated with Reddit itself, threads, and related content. This cluster included *moderators, reddit, megathread, and thread*, which largely encompassed these conversations. These groupings indicate a metatextual layer of the conversation, where participants discuss, callout, and deploy the direct language of the community infrastructure—suggesting a substantial layer of participation is centered around discussing the thread itself. Discussions surrounding moderators were often made by or tagging bots, though moderators themselves were also

directly referenced. For example, bots would often direct users to contact moderators directly in the thread:

“Please refer to our ****[Persona 5 Royal Questions Thread]** (https://www.reddit.com/r/Persona5/comments/c7lj9f/faq_for_common_persona_5_the_royal_questions/)****** *I am a bot, and this action was performed automatically. [...\”

In many cases such as this, bots (and users tagging them) would direct newcomers or mislabelled posts to other threads and even other subreddits. Contextually, community infrastructure might be further characterized through the extent to which moderation was practiced as part of community management, which could work to further limit newcomer actions. For example, a common bot-related post under the theme of *reddit* read:

“Hello! Your post was unfortunately removed because you have a new account. This was done as a necessary precaution in order to filter out any spam or bots that might be targeting this subreddit. Fret not! if you would like to have your post reinstated, simply message the mods and we will be glad to do it for you! *I am a bot, and this action was performed automatically. [...]

In addition, users discussed moderation of both their perception of the current subreddit as well as others. In one instance, a user wrote a complaint about Reddit in general on *r/persona5*, arguing that multiple subreddits centered around video games and their moderation was dissatisfying for several reasons:

[...] When I was a teenager we didn't creepily have waifu wars. Sure. People made comments about Tifa's tits but the constant creepy sexualization of characters is so much worse today.

In this case, the user made arguments that extended beyond the current subreddit, arguing that moderation needed to be increased because their perception of the community was that there was an increase in sexualized content that prohibited their enjoyment of the community.

Conversations surrounding *thread* tended to reference specific organized threads that moderators created (e.g., ****Persona 5 the Animation - Episode 23 - Discussion Thread****). Similar posts referenced other threads, often made by moderators, such as links to previous threads on the subreddit. Moderators also referenced the topic regarding organizational changes to the subreddit to the community, such as, “Hello everyone! As with many threads concerning NSFW changes, there are a lot of questions, concerns and disagreements here. I’m here on behalf of several mods to help clear things up. ...” In that particular instance, the moderator went on to explain a list of changes made to the subreddit to help moderate

the community for the sake of regulating sexualized content. Along these lines, conversations also referenced versions of the game, or Persona 5 games that were released in Japan, and not yet released or announced overseas, and discussion policies within the community, as the following post shows:

With the release of Persona 5 in Japan coming upon us, we would like to take this opportunity to provide some updates to our spoiler policy and to clarify what we will be enforcing and the consequences that follows. ... To help keep the experience of Persona 5 as enjoyable as possible for everyone, we hope that you will cooperate [...]

Occasionally, users referenced the topic of *thread* to discuss purchasing the game (e.g., “Taken from a previous thread, Best Buy seems to still have in stock”). Relatedly, conversations surrounding *megathread*, moderators posted organized threads where users could freely discuss spoilers relating to *Persona 5* (e.g., “Persona 5 - Spoilers Discussion [Megathread #2]”). This was the most frequent occurrence through which these conversations appeared. Other posts within the megathreads referenced it directly when users communicated about spoiler based content within it, such as the following:

“Well, we’re in the spoilers megathread, eh... the Star Cooperation / Confident Tōgō Hifumi (東郷 一二三) is really interesting because of the ability it gives.”

In this particular comment, the user referenced a character in the game (Tōgō Hifumi) and noted that there were spoilers associated with that character, so they indicated that their post was part of the ‘spoilers megathread.’ As such, posts like this, as well as the aforementioned, where users referenced moderation associated topics, indicate the importance of organizational structure within the community and how that could shape conversation. These structures were clearly geared towards guiding conversations, checking newcomers, and clearly defining predetermined spaces for different kinds of content.

Gameplay-related conversations

A second cluster of concepts emerged around gameplay related conversations. Discussions centered around the game itself and enjoyment of it, playing, and references to other people. The thematic cluster encompassed themes associated with *people*, *playing*, as well as *time*. These clusters emphasized experiences playing the game as well as references to others and time spent in the game as well as the mechanics of time (a large component of the game). Participants used these conversations to discuss optimization of in-game choices, asking mechanical questions, and discussing ‘routes’ (playthrough styles).

Discussions centered around the role of *people* were often connected with references to community members. Some conversations tended to occur when users described the subreddit as a place for engaging with like-minded users (e.g., “I’m constantly told I look like Futaba from Persona5- hello my people.”) At other times, this was in context to users debating which members had played the game, given that the main character had been released as a downloadable character in the game *Super Smash Brothers Ultimate*; as such, some users shared gatekeeping sentiments (e.g., “I get the feeling tho that many people in r/Persona5 haven’t even played the game bc they didn’t want a playstation; many of them are anime or super smash bros migrants”). Others referenced game and community, noting that they joined the subreddit because of the game’s popularity, and were therefore engaging in sensemaking processes to understand what drove its popularity:

“I’m trying to get a feel for Persona 5 since so many people seem to be anticipating it, but the website <http://atlus.com/persona5/home.html> is confusing as shit for someone who hasn’t played the series. I am an RPG fan and I can tell from the site that it’s an RPG. But that’s about it. Can anybody give me the lowdown, and why so many people seem to be interested?”

Discussions surrounding the topic of *time* tended to reference how long *Persona 5* took to complete; at times, users compared the gameplay to other games:

“Well i dont have that much free time and i still have other great games that i want to catch up with like KingdomHearts, FinalFantasy and Yakuza series, i try to limit my playtime to 100 hours on each game, i already spent about 200 hours on Persona5, thats bad.” along with “I think my most time spent has been Persona5, HZD, Uncharted (1-4), God of War4 and Spiderman. I don’t even want to talk about my Steam account.”).

At other points, users continued to compare the time it took to complete *Persona 5* along with other games that were noticeably shorter in length, noting that the length of the game did not equate to a quality narrative:

The last of us is like 13 hours with extremely limited optional things and considered a all time great. Length does not equal quality. To be fair, it also does not mean a long game can’t be quality too (H:ZD witcher3 persona5 are all quality games with quite a bit of length).

Additionally, a quote from the game’s loading screen, “Take your time,” was often referenced:

Just remember to Take Your Time to get a handle on the battle system and Persona management, also save often and ideally in a couple different slots in case you forget

to buy something or complete an activity that was more important on a previous in-game date. Of course, come back here or [/r/Persona5](#) if you've got questions!

Posts like this also provide further guidance to users, suggesting that they return to the subreddit as a resource for questions and information. In this sense, users participating in this thematic cluster were engaged in a more immediate conversation about the playing of the game itself. This is evidenced by threads that foreground immediate questions: “How the fuck do you beat the last boss?” and involve users, both new and experienced, sharing gameplay information and strategy.

Whereas the other clusters often became either metatextual (discourse about the conversation) or content-related (about the lore and relationships), this cluster was semantically rooted in the act of playing directly. This even extends to the comparisons drawn to gameplay in other titles such as *The Witcher 3* and *Grand Theft Auto 5*, with such comments as “Do you think Atlus will take the GTA 5 route for this game?” and rhetorical suggestions for redesign and expansion such as new online modes (“New online mode idea”). In this sense, this branch of the conversation was more rooted in the semantic concepts of gameplay than on *Persona 5* specifically.

Based on the Leximancer output, this participatory discourse was less prevalent than the metatextual cluster (constituted by moderation and COP factors) but was still more prominent than the personal-interest conversations taking place in the subreddit. This shows that beyond the structural discourse, the majority of fan participation was rooted in conversations directly related to gameplay.

Fandom-centric discourse

Finally, the third cluster of concepts are structured around *PS*, *love*, *story*, and *Morgana* (a main character in the game). The conversations shift from an organizational structure of the community to gameplay related conversations, to a more personal interest in the game and its related media—in other words, fandom. The dominant theme in this case largely references fandoms, preferences within the game, and conversations surrounding sense making related to characters and scenes.

For example, conversations about the character Morgana represented a distinct thematic cluster that played an important role in the community, which gave users an opportunity to reflect on the character as well as provide their thoughts on the character’s role in the upcoming release of *Persona 5 Royal*. In some cases, user experiences were brief and quotes merely reflected their opinions, e.g.: “Human morgana is the most beautiful thing on this planet.” However, in other instances, comments about the character were sometimes in-depth, where users detailed their perception on the role of Morgana and his contributions to the overall narrative within the game:

No, he's not that either. If anything, he's being sassy: I doubt he ever tried to actually "hurt" anyone. I'd go in more detail but there have been so many signs that show he actually cares: Morgana seemed concerned for Ryuji early on when he was letting his frustrations out on Kamoshida, he looked after Futaba when she first joined, he helped Haru during his own arc too, not to mention the ending. I wrote an analysis on Morgana some time ago. Don't feel forced to read it though, as it's really long.

Morgana, who plays the role of 'mascot character,' becomes a site of thematic interpretation here—the conversation has moved outside of the spheres of gameplay, and now is engaging directly with the narrative and lore of the character. In another example, some members referenced their view of the subreddit as a place that failed to support their favorite character. As one member noted: "Akechi is honestly my favorite p5 character and it's frustrating to see the akechi hate train. It's not bad on here, but on r/persona5 people will actually get mad at you for liking a villain because he's a good villain."

Similarly, the theme of *love* demonstrates another expressive connection where users interact with the content from the position of fandom. These posts tend to either express direct affirmation of certain characters, elements, mechanics, and fan content, such as: "Persona5. Love the soundtrack, characters' personalities and designs, and all the girls are best girl..." and "I love all these new changes in Persona5 Royal!". Whereas the previous cluster was semantically rooted in the *playing* of the game, this cluster is invested thematically in user emotion, joy, and fandom. *Love* in particular is connected to lore elements that extend beyond the game itself: fan art, trailers for *Persona 5 Royal*, live performances, cosplays, and 'ships' (advocations for characters getting together), such as: "Time to show some more RyuAnn love!" In this sense, the focus here becomes on appreciation and praise of game elements and characters, though this becomes complicated where it intersects with other thematic clusters. For example, passionately shipping or posting about a character in a romantic or sexualized context often prompts a return to metatextual conversation: "I mean if you really want to post ship content. r/Persona5 is not the best place for it. Post these in r/churchofAnn" or "r/persona5 when they realize its essentially just r/churchofmakoto and its gotten really fucking annoying". In these cases, the user's original post was chastised for being too expressively excited about a particular character, and so other users encouraged them (often crudely) to seek out the subreddit for that character specifically.

This fandom-centric discourse is similarly shared by the *PS* theme, which represents discussions related to PlayStation and Sony (the platform and publisher of the game, respectively) as fans build hype around the release of *Persona 5 Royal* as well as sales for downloadable content. This theme is also connected to other PlayStation games, as visualized by the strong connection to *Playing*. As *Persona 5* is a PlayStation exclusive, there is obvious fandom overlap between r/persona5 and other PlayStation titles. As fans discuss sales, events, publications, downloadable content (DLC), instructions for installing custom PlayStation and controller skins, and *Persona 5 Royal*, the root of the discourse remains in

their experience and position as fans: “It’s perfect! It was my starting point and I fell in love with the franchise about a year ago. After *Persona 5* I bought a PS Vita just so I could play *Personas 3, 4, and Innocent Sin* as well!”

Conversations about *PS* (PlayStation) referenced the *Persona* franchise’s roots as a largely PlayStation-exclusive franchise. Users often discussed the way that other Japanese games featured on PlayStation were underappreciated by new fans joining the subreddit coming from other entrypoints (such as those who had played *Phantom Strikers* on Switch). These users continually referenced other Japanese games in the context of ‘niceness,’ and often compared *Persona 5* to other titles (in this case, this quote references the game *Monster Hunter*): “They never played any. THOSE are niche Japanese games in the west. Actually *Persona 5* is even bigger than ever because it’s back on home console. Sorry but MHW is a bad example in regards to Xbox.” This user arguably seems to lament that *Persona 5* has gone ‘mainstream,’ as users organized each other into fan categories. Interestingly, the categorization here was not about *Persona* specifically, but *Persona*’s roots as a Japanese-made, PlayStation exclusive game. Clearly the role of platform was central to discussions of the dynamics of fan-centric discourse, and despite *Persona 5*’s transmedia presence, there was a consistent effort to frame the conversation around its ‘home console’ and PlayStation.

Likewise, some conversations referenced materials that were exclusively available in Japanese, and not yet available in English, but participants in the community wished to discuss new content related to the overall *Persona 5* franchise: “...The Japanese version of his character sheet also says he’s a 16-year old boy who just transferred to Shujin. Link to his character sheet <http://persona5.jp/tgs2015/character1/> Taken from below.” Regarding this aforementioned example, we also see that the information shared does not come from a .com link, but a .jp link (in this case, the official persona5.jp link). Other users shared links to .jp resources, explicitly referencing the original source material from Japan as information (“So this is 5months old now, but recent info definitely confirmed social links based on the Tarot arcana as in P3 and P4, they are simply named cooperation. http://persona5.jp/school_life/cooperation.html”).

Here, participants share and reflect on materials on the game and what it might mean for upcoming *Persona 5* content for the story. Importantly, this may be reflective of the multicultural aspects of the fandom on multiple levels, as the Reddit community is in English, though fans link and discuss to Japanese source material, while also discussing its meaning and importance for the larger *Persona* series, which is ultimately reflective of the transmedia nature of the media.

This extends into the narrative elements of the game, represented by the *Story* theme. Here, users discuss favorite moments, compare narrative elements with other titles, and critique the content of the game. For example, players debate the role of mechanics in the story, or cutscenes and relationships that resonated with them over others: “That’s also great, but a huge part of the game is the story and the characters. A lot of the life sim stuff like the confidant mechanics is just cutscenes. The /r/Persona5 reddit is pretty much just

memeing on the characters and storyline.” While this intersects with the *playing* theme, the difference here is that users are not discussing these elements for the purpose of altering their play behavior, but to participate in fan discussions. For example, exchanges of fan content, conspiracies, and praise are common:

There is someone who made a story about what happened after the game in another thread, it was pretty great and it helped my post game sadness lol. So if you want to make it as headcanon, check it out _^

In the post above, we see the user reference their experience playing *Persona 5* and the emotional impact based on a story they read. The user also included a portion of an emoticon, typically referenced as “^_^,” a *kaomoji*, or Japanese emoticon that typically expresses joy. In other examples where users discuss their interest of the game, they described their experience of one being linked not only to the game of *Persona 5*, but of a major location within the game, *Shibuya*, which is an actual location in Japan, as the following quote shows:

“... but after so many hours of playing and sinking in to the world of persona5/Shibuya, would you really feel satisfied [sic] if you just for an insanely op persona on your first and original playthrough?”

In this case, the participant asked another user about Persona creation within the game, a mechanic, while also referencing key aspects of the game (an important location, *Shibuya*), and their satisfaction with the game and their first play through—indicating the importance of a first time playing the game.

In these themes, we see the emphasis on interpersonal connections between fans and critical discussion of the game’s narrative, platform, and characters as taking priority, compared to the metatextual and gameplay-specific discourse. This cluster discursively foregrounds the position of the users as fans: what they enjoy, favourite characters, critiques, ships, and intersections with other fandoms and games they enjoy on the platform. While we expected to find these kinds of intimate fan discussions, these conversations occupied a quantitatively small part of the overall sample.

Conclusions

DeKosnik (2016) points out, drawing on Jenkins, that “the work of networked infrastructure-building may seem opaque to the millions who regularly interact with the products of that labor: it is not online infrastructure, but online community, that excites and engages people” (p.124). *r/persona5* began as a niche community for a single game, with a

smaller volume of conversations compared to larger subreddits: it was a space where fans could become familiar with one another and with volunteer moderators. Yet, as the fandom grew, the space has thematically evolved to be far more structural to accommodate new fans from varying entrypoints. Moderation itself and the rules and governance at play may prompt community responses that could even serve as an ongoing social mechanism for engagement within the community. The findings of this study, which analyzed eleven themes across three thematic clusters, characterizes this discursive evolution of *r/persona5*. Our thematic analysis highlights the importance of understanding the complex dynamics of fan labor and discussions. The dominant thematic clusters, which included metatextual conversations and community infrastructure, gameplay related conversations, and interpersonal communication surrounding content within the game, served both as content and as windows into the complex inter-community dynamics of a shifting fandom.

For instance, the metatextual layer of discourse proved to be the structural key to the community in its dominance as a theme (e.g., bots and users directed newcomers to the relevant threads and removed posts by brand-new users). As there were clusters of topics centered around metatexts that involved the organizational structure of the community, often, conversations were about the state of the community itself and its relationship to other Reddit threads in the fandom. We had not anticipated that this pillar would occupy such a dominating role in the fan discourse—but expected conversations to revolve around the other themes (both discussions of play, and engagement with characters and narrative). Instead, our study suggests that a strong metatextual conversation was a crucial precursor to the success of *r/persona5* as a transmedia fandom. Given the nature of *Persona 5* as a single entity in a larger game series, an important question remains: How do we better understand the evolution and survival of a community, especially one that exists because of a single topic that ebbs and flows? Greater scholarly attention is required to the ways that fan spaces evolve structurally and discursively over time. As our previous work (Berge & Britt, 2021) has demonstrated: fans do not perform labor in isolation, but participate in crucial community structures. The methodological approach taken in this study is useful for examining discourse around a fan community, especially in the context of its structure and dominant conversation and the potential trajectory and evolution of it over time.

Our study, however, is largely horizontal, and did not involve conversations with participants and motivations for participation in a community—for instance, whether users opt in or out, and how they choose to self-present within that community (e.g., providing personal information, for instance, based on structural affordances of Reddit). But our hope is that this work can provide a broader overview of key community functions to guide further analyses into transmedia fandoms. Communities like *r/persona5* are places where users come and go; some may stay longer than others; others may visit, post once, and never return. In the case of *r/persona5*, we recognized that the community adapted dramatically to accommodate a large number of newcomers from diverse entry points; a shift that was signaled by an abundance of moderation-focused discourse. Yet as a result, much of the fandom-centric conversations were limited, and it will be valuable to see how,

as *Persona 5*'s proliferation as a current transmedia phenomenon dies down, *r/persona5* adapts this structure further to focus on retention of existing members.

This examination is illustrative in nature, and not exhaustive of the larger *Persona* series or other video game communities, especially as the popularity of games become increasingly globalized. Communities such as *r/persona5* blend the lines between consumer and producer of fan media, which, as Jenkins (2006) notes, represent cultural convergence. Fans take media into their own hands, create content, participate, respond, and engage in interaction, creating new narratives about the original media in question. Here, we have also shown how fan discourse was both contained (in this case, within *r/persona5* itself) and shaped by clear thematic structures. In doing so, we also see that the most avid parts of the fandom (shipping characters, trading theories about the game, and so forth) were overshadowed by layers of moderation and active game play. Structurally, the importance of moderation and how this enables new layers of fan participation should be further examined, especially as the platforms where fans discuss games continue to evolve.

Biographical notes

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