The Benefits of Banding: Overcoming Barriers to Community Participation Among *Magic: The Gathering* Players

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ABSTRACT

Many game communities, including those who primarily play Magic: The Gathering (MTG), struggle with different kinds of toxicity, often directed towards players of minority gender identities. To help understand how these players deal with the barriers they face, we conducted a two-phase mixed-methods study. After surveying 324 MTG players and interviewing 14 of them, we found such players encountered barriers such as male-dominated environments, stereotyping and underestimation and developed strategies of community support, including personal adaptation based on previous systemic familiarity and alternate formats to persist and succeed. The research highlights economic barriers, cultural and social barriers, along with knowledge and experience gaps. Important themes include recognizing cultural norms, overcoming stereotyping, engaging selectively, and building inclusive playgroups, resilience and adaptability. We believe these strategies imply a broader need for intentional inclusivity practices and support mechanisms within gaming communities to foster a more equitable and representative gaming public.

Keywords

Community, Barriers, Ethnography, Feminism, Trading card games

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, game communities have come under scrutiny for their toxicity (Adinolf & Turkay, 2018; Beres et al., 2021) and the role that game-makers can take in the normalisation of appropriate behaviours within them (Bylieva & Nam, 2019), typically in the form of interventions such as banning players or pseudo-judicial tribunal investigations. However, disparaging stereotypes such as the "fake geek girl" (Scott, 2019) or the cultural backlash against the supposed "SJW invasion" of games (Consalvo, 2012; Proctor & Kies, 2018) persist and contribute to who is welcome to participate in game communities. While game-makers can use automated tools in digital contexts or reports to identify and act on obvious slurs or verbal harassment, these deeper attitudinal issues affect who is invited into teams, mentored, and provided with other kinds of support that leads to long-term success and engagement. In response, non-male players have developed strategies of resistance, including organizing

their own inclusive communities in the wake of phenomena such as GamerGate, #NotYourShield, and #1ReasonWhy (Harvey & Fisher, 2019; Richard & Gray, 2018).

The digital communities most often scrutinized for these issues have persistent public online worlds and forums, allowing researchers relatively easy access. In contrast, analog game communities formed around role-playing games and collectible card games are time-bounded and play occurs within homes, conventions, and local game stores. Of course, such players also rely on digital communication tools for organization and play. Some scholars have explored the topics of role-playing games and participation (Giordano, 2022), communities in card games (Czibor, Claussen, & van Praag, 2019), and consumptive practices (Park et al., 2018; Martin, 2019). Still, many significant communities have not been studied in as much detail, especially when they are hybrid private-public, online-offline groups.

While there is parallel research into gender issues in D&D communities (Garcia, 2017) and some investigations into players who prefer analog to digital play (Trammell, 2010), we found that there is limited academic research into the role of non-male participants in Magic: The Gathering (MTG) communities, particularly when it comes to the barriers to entry that preclude them from comfortably participating and competing successfully. Those who cannot comfortably participate may thereby be excluded from play spaces such as game stores and are thus unlikely to compete in high-level play or win competitive tournaments. This contributes to a pipeline problem whereby there is also a lack of visible role models for aspiring women players, so fewer end up participating even more casually. Thus, our project seeks to address two main research questions: 1) how do non-male MTG players experience barriers to community participation, and 2) how do they create emergent strategies for success and overcoming barriers?

Using a feminist media lens, we asked questions that probe how non-male players develop an internalized model of success as defined by our participants, and what barriers there might be that prohibit both participation and game success. How do race and gender pose a barrier to entry in the organized MTG scene? Utilizing Alison Harvey's notions of white, male-dominated discourse, and her re-interpretation of Foucault's notion of power (2019), as well as Sharma and Singh's book Re-Understanding Media (2022), we aimed to to understand the workings of the subcultural industry that is MTG from a feminist perspective.

This research project is also grounded in the work of subcultural studies, specifically, the participatory aspects of community engagement. This project began with the ontological question "who is allowed to participate?" As the socialization for most subcultures is dependent on its player base (or its own public sphere), the ability for novices to be included in such subcultures is limited to established players' willingness to include different groups of people. Giordano (2022) refers to this tightly guarded play as "idioculture". When minority fans react to being overlooked, Suzanne Scott (2019) describes how "content producers offer (routinely half-hearted) responses to speak back

to these concerns, and media industries dismiss minority fans' textual predilections as too niche when these efforts are not immediately successful" (p. 3). As such, merging these two fields of subcultural (or geek) studies and feminist media theory in relation to a massive leisure game such as MTG not only builds upon historical studies of gender in media, but also pushes the boundaries of what it means to participate in enclosed and often what are considered normalized spaces of male-dominated play.

Our study reveals several significant insights into the barriers faced by non-male players in the MTG community and the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. The research highlights: economic barriers, cultural and social barriers, and knowledge and experience gaps. Further, participants were clear about their abilities and strategies for overcoming barriers and the impact of previous minority experiences of being crucial to engaging with the community. Some important themes that emerged from the interviews include: male-dominated environments and men as the normative player, stereotyping and underestimation, community support and inclusive playgroups, resilience and adaptability, and selective engagement. In addition to economic, cultural, and social barriers, our findings highlight a recurring tension between marginalized players' desire for authenticity and the pressure to conform to competitive norms. These pressures often manifest as emotional labour, where non-male players must continually justify their presence and competence in a predominantly male-dominated space. These insights deepen our understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by marginalized players and their strategies for resilience.

METHODS

Our research was conducted in two phases as an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Clark, 2018, p. 123). In the first phase, we collected empirical survey data regarding Magic players' involvement in organized MTG play (as contrasted with play at home or other personal spaces). The next phase of research used personal interviews with study participants who opted in during the first phase, allowing them to express the nature of specific barriers and their strategies for overcoming them to participate in MTG.

Since this study engages with potentially sensitive gender-related experiences, it is crucial to ensure that participant confidentiality and consent protocols are comprehensively detailed within the methodology section. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of the questions, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. To protect participant anonymity, identifying details were removed from data sets and pseudonyms were used where necessary. Informed consent was obtained through verbal and recorded consent, which clearly outlined how data would be used, stored, and shared. Furthermore, all interviews were conducted in a manner designed to foster trust and comfort, emphasizing participants' control over their narrative disclosures.

This research methodology utilized a mixed-methods approach: quantitative statistical analysis, and qualitative analysis via coding of surveys and interviews. The survey yielded n=328 respondents to 33 questions of varying

format (multiple choice, open-ended). We rejected 4 responses due to incomplete data that didn't pass the attention check. In coding the data using NVivo and ATLAS.ti, a collaborative approach was done in the following order: data acquisition, review of data, identification of focus areas, guided thematic analysis, and collaborative interpretation. Qualitatively, the data was first coded for overarching themes in relation to responses; then, a sentiment analysis was run seeking positive, neutral, and negative sentiments in relation to specific questions as well as questions with respect to demographic data (i.e., self-reported gender). The data was then run quantitatively using statistical analysis methods and, once done, run again through NVivo and ATLAS.ti for the same themes and analysis found in the statistical analysis. In approaching this study via a mixed-methods analysis, the data, themes and findings were refined at each stage.

Based on survey responses, the following four gender groups were defined: male, female, other (not male or female), and non-male (female + other). Using ATLAS.ti's metric for sentiment polarity, average overall response sentimentality (positive or negative) was computed for each gender group, along with the sentimentality for each group's perception of competitive and non-competitive play. Overall response sentimentality and perception of competitive versus non-competitive play was compared between the gender groups using participants' sentiment polarities and a one-way ANOVA. Sentiments between gender groups aligning with competitive and non-competitive play were also compared.

Phase I – Survey

An initial survey was performed to study participants who detailed their involvement in the organized Magic scene. We solicited participants with fliers in local game stores, along with advertisements to global online communities such as the Magic TCG subreddit. Overall, our participants are almost all from the USA and Canada. We then performed a quantitative analysis as summarized earlier. This included looking at the distribution of the responses and computing the correlation between the variables of interest, using principles from Bayesian statistics (Puga, Krzywinski & Altman, 2015) and Neyman-Pearson detection (Neyman, Pearson, 1933) to determine the statistical significance. These methods have been chosen to help analyze data in cases of imbalance arising from bias in the respondents. In addition to statistical analysis, we coded the open-ended answers of the survey questions for a qualitative approach to the answers. This allowed us to develop a categorical model of the factors involved and develop the interview guide for the second phase of the research project.

We received 324 accepted responses, with these demographics: 30% women, 55% men, 10% non-binary, and 2% other, with 21% of all respondents identifying as transgender participants. This has provided us with high-level themes to explore around the barriers of the spaces being considered "too white" and "non-inclusive" by forging bonds with like-minded people, starting play in more inclusive game formats and bringing along friends made before play. Overall, these findings show how non-male players put in extra work and actively network to cultivate play spaces where they can prosper.

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Phase II – Ethnographic Interviews

During the second phase, we pursued the ethnographic objective of thick description (Geertz, 1977; Thompson, 2001) to understand players through one-on-one interviews (n = 14). We analyzed the survey results to understand the broad issues affecting players and are writing our semi-structured interview guide. We conducted virtual interviews with 14 participants who indicated their willingness to do so during the survey phase. These interviewees received a $20 gift card for their involvement. Through these interviews, we focused on the various gendered politics present in play from both the perspectives of the players (survey respondents) as well as the professional tournament organizers (Magic Judges). In this phase, we paid particular attention to the strategies for success non-male participants face as well as the pathways to high-level play, understanding that these pathways for non-male participants will likely look extremely different from male players.

The ethnographic interviews were qualitatively analyzed. They were recorded, transcribed, and coded to facilitate the recognition of patterns and themes. An open coding scheme was developed and then refined in a selective process to ensure it captured the most significant kinds of responses we received. This structured our descriptive reporting. The semi-structured format of the interviews facilitated discussions of both overt and subtle challenges, such as navigating the emotional labour associated with proving oneself in male-dominated spaces and employing selective engagement strategies to mitigate exclusion. This approach enabled us to capture the complexity of participants' lived experiences, including the persistence required to access mentorship and build supportive networks within the community

As this project is committed to ensuring its approach is both intersectional and feminist, particular attention was paid to ensuring that the thick description employed in these interviews is "holistic" and provides a meaningful "understanding of people's cultural practices" as discussed by Buch & Staller (2007, p. 188). This approach helped to detail untold stories about the presence and contributions of non-men to MTG communities along with their strategies for perseverance.

Results

The results of this two-phase study indicate that there are complex interplays of gendered, cultural, and social dynamics that impact player experiences and participation rates among women and gender minorities. The survey data alone (as demonstrated by Tables 1 and 2) initially suggested a hesitation among participants to acknowledge and detail the barriers they face, particularly those related to unwelcoming and exclusive environments. This reluctance was evident in the sparse and often superficial responses to questions directly addressing issues of inclusion and exclusion within the community. However, the interview data painted a different picture: when participants were encouraged to speak freely and assured of confidentiality, they were much more open about their experiences of discomfort and exclusion - these findings are supported by the thematic analyses done on first the survey data, then the interview data, respectively. The survey data highlighted broad issues faced by non-male MTG players, such as economic and cultural barriers within the

community. The subsequent interviews deepened the understanding of these challenges by revealing specific lived experiences, strategies for navigating exclusionary practices, and the emotional impacts of these encounters. In illustrating how non-male players adapt and persist, these interviews offer a more extensive context and nuance to the survey findings.

Gender Group	Sample Size	Average Sentiment Polarity [-1,1]
Male	97	0.1346 +/- 0.1804
Female	65	0.1201 +/- 0.1773
Other	25	0.0316 +/- 0.2322
Non-Male (Male + Female)	90	0.0955 +/- 0.1981

Table 1: Comparison of overall sentiment polarity of responses to survey questions pertaining to barriers to entry and competitive play (p = 0.0949).

Gender Group	Sample Size	Average Play Polarity [-1,1]
Male	50	0.0681 +/- 0.2421
Female	43	0.0839 +/- 0.1950
Other	17	-0.0723 +/- 0.1878
Non-Male (Female + Other)	60	0.0396 +/- 0.2054

Table 2: Comparison of competitive (positive) versus non-competitive (negative) play polarity of responses to survey questions pertaining to barriers to entry and competitive play (p = 0.0750).

While the survey data revealed a hesitation to admit and focus on the barriers and methods of overcoming these unwelcoming environments, the thematic analysis of the interview data showed that once participants felt supported and safe, they provided deeper insights into the cultural and social dynamics that foster barriers. The reluctance to openly discuss barriers in survey responses can be seen as a manifestation of Foucault's concept of power, where the discourse that minimizes issues of gender and inclusivity is internalized by the community members themselves, leading to underreporting or downplaying of their personal (and systemic) exclusionary experiences. Many discussed their personal strategies for overcoming these barriers, which often involved seeking inclusive spaces and leveraging community support. These discussions were crucial in identifying effective strategies employed by players to navigate the unwelcoming aspects of the community, such as participating in women-only tournaments or engaging more deeply with supportive local game stores.

The interviews revealed the significant emotional labour non-male players expend in maintaining their presence in MTG spaces. One participant shared, "I love the idea of creating these spaces like a bespoke dinner party—ensuring the atmosphere is just right for everyone to enjoy. It's about setting up the event and curating that experience so others feel welcome and included, even if I sometimes feel out of place initially". This labour often extended beyond skill, encompassing the need to navigate stereotypes and confront microaggressions. Moreover, participants discussed the tension between staying authentic to their personal values and adopting aggressive or assertive behaviours perceived as necessary for competitive success. As one interviewee reflected, 'They told me I needed to be tougher to win, but that's not who I am. It's exhausting pretending to be someone else". These findings highlight how systemic biases amplify the psychological toll on marginalized players.

Participants frequently emphasized selective engagement as a strategy for navigating exclusionary environments. This involved seeking out or creating inclusive spaces, such as women-only or LGBTQ+-friendly events. One participant described their experience: 'I found a queer-friendly MTG group online, and it changed everything. For the first time, I felt respected and valued.' By prioritizing engagement in these supportive spaces, players could enjoy the game while mitigating the emotional impact of broader competitive settings. This approach underscores the agency of marginalized players in shaping their own participatory practices. Another emergent theme was the effort required to establish mentorship relationships. Unlike male players, who were often naturally integrated into mentorship networks, non-male players described having to 'bother' mentors to gain recognition or support. As one participant shared, 'I messaged judges repeatedly to get feedback on my certification process—it felt like I was nagging, but I had no other choice.' This theme highlights the additional burdens placed on marginalized players to access the same resources and opportunities more readily available to others.

Discussion

Many participants identified broader economic constraints as a significant initial factor barring entry. These costs often disproportionately affect players who do not have substantial disposable income, limiting their ability to participate in competitive aspects of the game. A prominent theme that emerged from the interviews is the male-dominated nature of game spaces - this "male-dominated" game space tends to create an environment that can be perceived as unwelcoming or hostile to women and non-binary individuals. Participants reported experiences of exclusion and marginalization, including being overlooked during tournaments and receiving unsolicited advice that underestimated their knowledge of the game. A recurring theme is male dominance within the gaming spaces, which can create environments that feel hostile or unwelcoming to women and non-binary individuals. This dominance is often accompanied by explicit or implicit behaviours that exclude or marginalize those who are not male. One participant disclosed: "People were asking my friend how he was doing (who was doing worse than me in the tournament) and, like, completely ignore[d] me". Female players often face stereotyping and underestimation of their skills and knowledge of the game. This can manifest in being overlooked in competitive settings or receiving

unsolicited advice that assumes a lack of understanding. Such experiences can diminish the enjoyment of the game and discourage active participation, affecting the confidence and engagement of women players.

The interviews introduced the theme of emotional labour associated with being a minority in a male-dominated gaming space. Participants discussed the constant effort required to prove their legitimacy as players, confront stereotypes, and manage interactions where they felt underestimated. This emotional labour extends to dealing with subtle exclusion, such as being ignored in conversations about strategy or feeling overlooked in competitive settings. One interviewee described how exhausting it was to continually "prove herself" during tournaments, noting that male players were often afforded the benefit of the doubt regarding their skill level, while she had to repeatedly demonstrate competence before receiving similar acknowledgment. This theme of emotional labour enriches the understanding of how systemic biases affect marginalized players' experiences beyond overt exclusion, encompassing the mental and emotional toll of navigating these spaces daily.

In analyzing the qualitative findings, several key themes emerge around the barriers faced by marginalized players within the MTG community, highlighting how exclusionary dynamics and adaptive strategies shape participant experiences. These findings underscore the significance of community support and adaptation in navigating a predominantly male-dominated space, themes which align with the insights presented in this paper. The study outlines that MTG players from minority gender identities encounter exclusion rooted in stereotyping and cultural norms that prioritize competitiveness over community-building interactions (Harvey, 2019; Sharma & Singh, 2022). Our research identifies exclusionary barriers rooted in cultural norms and stereotypes, where non-male players are frequently marginalized and left out of mentoring networks. Such barriers prevent these players from easily accessing support and advice, leading to a reliance on self-learning. This dynamic is emphasized by the study's application of Giordano's (2022) concept of "idioculture," which refers to tightly guarded play practices and norms that disadvantage those outside the dominant male cohort. Due to limited access to informal mentoring, many participants report having to "figure things out" independently, a recurring theme within the MTG community (as captured in the ethnographic interviews). Participants often resort to an in-depth study of the game's complex rules and mechanics because direct mentorship is scarce. This self-reliant learning mode aligns with the Banding paper's findings, where players leverage past experiences of systemic exclusion to create internal models for learning and advancement (Wolf, 2012).

The prevalence of male players and the cultural norms within these spaces can discourage the participation and retention of women and non-binary players, leading to feelings of isolation or discomfort. One participant stated: "It is obviously a very male-dominated space... It was pretty hostile". Harvey's (2019) framework helps us understand how the community's discourse – shaped by predominantly white, male voices – contributes to the creation of

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barriers for non-male players. These barriers are not merely about overt exclusion but are embedded in the very language and expectations of the community. For instance, the use of jargon, competitive norms, and the valorization of certain types of knowledge (e.g., strategic play over community building) all reinforce a particular power structure that privileges existing male-dominated hierarchies.

This study's results show that when non-male players attempt to navigate these structures, they often encounter resistance or marginalization, which is subtly endorsed by the community's prevailing discourse. One participant noted the mental toll of constantly feeling the need to demonstrate her competence: "It's always like, 'Oh, wow, you actually know what you're doing!' as if they're shocked I can hold my own. It feels like I have to do twice as much to prove I belong here, and even then, it's not enough". This underscores the double standard in expectations, where women and non-binary players feel pressured to "prove themselves" repeatedly - a challenge not typically faced by their male counterparts. This example highlights how subtle exclusions, such as being ignored or dismissed, compound feelings of alienation and reinforce perceptions of inferiority within the community. Additionally, participants described the emotional toll of managing microaggressions and unsolicited advice that undermined their expertise. For example, one woman shared: "Every time I sit down to play, someone assumes I need help with the most basic rules. I've been playing for years, but they don't care—it's patronizing and exhausting." These interactions require players to balance the need to assert themselves with the desire to avoid conflict, adding an extra layer of emotional labour to their participation. Many participants also spoke about the energy required to maintain composure in the face of subtle or overt hostility. One participant described the delicate balance of addressing inappropriate comments or behaviour, stating, "It's rough because it's hard to say, 'Hey, that was kind of...' You don't want to be the squeaky wheel or cause shit like, 'Hey, by the way, this guy said this hugely misogynistic thing.' And then people go, 'Well...' You put yourself out there, and there's maybe an equal chance—or a negatively weighted chance—that you'll face repercussions for calling it out. It makes it hard to stand up for yourself". This highlights the emotional calculus involved in these interactions, as marginalized players weigh the potential consequences of asserting their boundaries against the need to protect their emotional well-being. Overall, the theme of emotional labour enriches the understanding of systemic biases in the MTG community by shedding light on the cumulative toll of everyday interactions. This labour not only affects the immediate enjoyment of the game but also contributes to long-term burnout and disengagement, underscoring the need for structural changes to reduce these burdens on marginalized players.

The interviews highlight that the MTG community, like many other subcultures, can be exclusionary. However, the interviewees' prior lived experiences as minorities prepared them to deal with these challenges. The ability to persist despite feeling out of place is a common thread; many interviewees described how they continued to play and compete in MTG despite encountering exclusion or underestimation. This resilience is rooted in their lifelong experiences of overcoming similar challenges in other areas.

Many interviewees emphasized the importance of finding and building supportive playgroups. They sought out inclusive spaces where they could play with others who understood their experiences. This is a direct application of their broader strategy of forming supportive networks in other areas of their lives.

One interviewee reflected on their childhood and educational experiences, noting that they had often been in environments where they stood out due to their gender or race. This has made them accustomed to navigating spaces where they might not be initially welcomed. This familiarity with minority status allows them to approach MTG with a certain level of preparedness for potential exclusion or marginalization. She stated: "I grew up in an environment where I always looked different from other people, but I saw that as normal. So, the idea of being in a space and being different from people is not something that I'm unfamiliar with". Another participant also highlighted a similar background and described the consistent feeling of being a minority in various other aspects of their life, from educational to professional settings.

This experience has made them resilient and less likely to be deterred by the initial unwelcoming atmosphere in MTG. She stated: "It definitely feels so like I grew up in [a big city], which is a city that's 0.3% Asian. So, I always looked different from other people, but I saw that as normal". Yet another stated, "Growing up, I was always the only one who looked like me in the room. That experience taught me how to navigate exclusion and find my own path. In MTG, I use those skills to find groups that are more accepting and to stand my ground in less welcoming environments". Finally, another participant stated: "Being a minority in other areas of my life has definitely helped me deal with the challenges in MTG. It's not easy, but I've learned to seek out people and places that value inclusivity and respect." These previous experiences manifest in how interviewees approach the MTG community with resilience and insight. They leverage their background and experiences with systemic oppression to develop strategies for dealing with the barriers they face: many interviewees emphasize the importance of finding and building supportive playgroups. They seek out inclusive spaces where they can play with others who understand their experiences. One participant noted: "Playing in my local store was tough. I felt ignored and underestimated. But then I found a queer-friendly MTG group online, and it made all the difference. Finally, I was playing with people who respected me and valued my presence." This particular sense of seeking out those with similar systemic understanding is a direct application of their broader strategies of forming supportive networks in other areas of their lives. Their ability to draw on these experiences enables them to find ways to participate meaningfully in MTG, despite the barriers they face.

Our sentiment analysis of the interview responses revealed a significant number of negative sentiments related to barriers experienced by non-male players. These barriers include economic constraints, cultural exclusion, and social dynamics that reinforce the dominance of established male players. We return to the concept of "idioculture" as described by Giordano (2022) which is particularly relevant here, as it highlights how tightly guarded social norms

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and practices within the MTG community can marginalize new and diverse participants. This exclusion is not just overt but often subtle, embedded in the very culture of the game. Non-male players often seek out or create specific playgroups that provide a more welcoming and inclusive environment. These playgroups serve as safe spaces where they can enjoy the game without facing the negative behaviours often encountered in more general or competitive settings. One participant described the importance of finding a supportive playgroup: "I knew I needed to find a group that understood what it's like to feel different. I was lucky to join a women's MTG group that meets every week. It's been a game-changer for me. We support each other and it feels like a second family". Selective engagement highlights a strategic approach to resilience, allowing marginalized players to enjoy MTG while mitigating the negative experiences associated with broader competitive spaces. This strategy shows how non-male players exercise agency by forming or joining supportive spaces that cater to their need for an inclusive environment, underscoring the significance of community-building as a form of resistance against systemic barriers.

Another participant elaborated on their experience with feeling hesitant to discuss barriers in the community: "I had a mentor in [city] when I came out, too. Since moving to Canada, I haven't really had, like, a specific mentor, but I, you know, there are people who I respect... It ties into the, like, 'I'm different from other people' sort of things that it is easier to have these mentorship connections if you are, like, if you don't look like me". These participant insights illustrate the difficulty non-male players face in openly discussing barriers and seeking mentorship within the community. Leaning on their own experiences when faced with systemic barriers based on their minority attributes, these participants were able to wield previous knowledge and techniques and apply these to the MTG community. This initial hesitation is often overcome during interviews, where participants feel more comfortable and supported, leading to more detailed and honest discussions about their experiences.

Drawing on Sharma and Singh's insights (2022), this discussion can extend into how media (both digital and analog within MTG) shapes perceptions and interactions within the community. Sharma and Singh argue that media are not just tools for communication but also instruments of power that shape cultural norms and expectations. In the context of MTG, both the physical cards themselves and the digital platforms used for organizing and discussing the game act as media that reinforce certain narratives and exclude others. The role of digital forums, streaming platforms, and even the artwork on the cards can be seen to perpetuate a white, male-centric narrative that excludes or marginalizes other voices. This study found that non-male players often create parallel structures or use media differently to carve out spaces where they can express their identities and play styles, which are frequently at odds with the mainstream MTG community. The application of Harvey's (2019) and Sharma and Singh's (2022) theories to the study of MTG reveals the deep-seated nature of gendered barriers within the community and suggests pathways for change. Recognizing the role of discourse and media in shaping these

environments is crucial for developing strategies that challenge the status quo and promote inclusivity.

Of further interest is Suzanne Scott's (2019) notion of half-hearted responses from content producers and the dismissal of minority fans' concerns; these same themes were evident in the interview data. Participants often felt that their concerns and perspectives were not taken seriously by other players, and the community as a whole; this phenomenon led to feelings of alienation in our participants. Negative sentiments in the interviews frequently reflected participants' experiences of being ignored or marginalized in game stores and competitive environments. This insularity follows Trammell's observations that "the old guard of hobbyists perceived themselves as nerdy outsiders, they were able to form communities of practice that embraced a white suburban libertarian and even isolationist ethic. These communities of practice were often beneficial to predominantly white hobbyists. Within these communities, members were able to parlay specialized knowledge to access opportunities that weren't afforded to outsiders" (2023, p. 139). Accordingly, newcomers drawn to the game (often by corporate attempts to diversify the player base) more recently are treated as intruders, along gendered and racialized lines. There may also be dissonance between inclusive social media environments and local gaming stores (Duddy & Rosnau, 2024) that actually reinforces localized gatekeeping.

These experiences are compounded by gendered and economic barriers that disproportionately affect non-male players, limiting their ability to fully participate and compete in tournaments and game stores. These findings align with Harvey's (2019) critique of male-dominated discourses and reinforce Giordano's (2022) concept of idioculture in geek cultures, where exclusionary norms are tightly guarded. By choosing to engage selectively and build supportive networks, marginalized players not only resist these norms but actively reshape the cultural dynamics of their gaming spaces. This dual role of engagement and resistance underscores the resilience and adaptability of non-male players. While Trammell (2023) focuses on the racial and historical gatekeeping embedded in analog hobbyist cultures, our findings extend this critique by examining how these same gatekeeping practices manifest in gendered terms within contemporary MTG communities. Both reinforce the selective permeability of play spaces, but our participants' strategies suggest growing counter-publics that challenge this norm from within.

Despite these challenges, the sentiment analysis also highlighted positive and neutral sentiments that reflect the strategies non-male players use to navigate and overcome these barriers. Community support and the creation of inclusive spaces are critical. Many participants spoke about the importance of finding supportive groups and organizing women-only or LGBTQ+ friendly events. These efforts align with feminist media theory's emphasis on creating counter-narratives and alternative spaces where marginalized voices can thrive. These efforts align closely with feminist media theory's emphasis on constructing counter-narratives and alternative spaces that challenge dominant norms. Participants reported that these spaces were instrumental in sharing knowledge and strategies, fostering mutual growth. One described, "The

women-only draft nights were amazing. We could ask questions without feeling judged, and honestly, I got better at the game because we were all willing to help each other without that condescending attitude you sometimes get elsewhere". This highlights the alignment of such practices with feminist media theory's emphasis on counter-narratives and alternative structures, allowing marginalized players to not only participate but thrive.

The act of organizing women-only or LGBTQ+ events further reflects a proactive approach to reshaping the cultural dynamics within gaming communities. Another participant emphasized, "I started a beginner-friendly Commander league, and it's been great to see how new players, especially women, feel comfortable and come back week after week". These intentional practices are direct forms of resistance against the broader exclusionary norms, showcasing how marginalized players actively challenge systemic barriers while fostering resilience and camaraderie within their communities.

Such efforts also demonstrate agency, as marginalized players are not just adapting to existing norms but actively redefining them. This ongoing reshaping of MTG spaces underscores the transformative power of inclusive playgroups and the broader implications for community support as a vital strategy for counteracting systemic exclusion. By forming inclusive playgroups and organizing dedicated events, participants not only created spaces for themselves but also actively reshaped the cultural dynamics of their gaming communities. These spaces acted as platforms for mutual support, knowledge sharing, and resilience-building, helping participants counteract systemic exclusionary practices. Furthermore, the development of these supportive networks reflects a form of resistance and agency within the community, demonstrating how marginalized players can carve out spaces for success and visibility despite persistent barriers.

These interviews revealed that this proactive "community-building" often involved a combination of strategic engagement and selective participation. Participants noted that seeking out or even founding supportive groups required effort but provided significant rewards, such as increased confidence and a strengthened sense of identity as MTG players. This approach illustrates how marginalized players employ adaptive strategies not just for survival but for fostering a culture of inclusivity, allowing them to enjoy the game and challenge the structures that previously marginalized them. This dual role of engagement and resistance further underscores the transformative potential of community support within the MTG landscape.

Lastly, however, the success of these strategies highlights how the burden falls on non-male players and leaves significant room for allies. While Wizards of the Coast uses inclusive rhetorical strategies in its marketing and occasionally promotes welcoming content creators, those drawn to the game by these often find a different atmosphere in local gaming stores. In Wizards of the Coast's other property Dungeons & Dragons, the "Matt Mercer" effect of social media live play broadcasts can lead to friction between differing expectations (Duddy & Rosnau, 2024) but the cooperative gameplay and built-in ideas of roleplaying negotiation often ameliorate this. In the adversarial realm of MTG,

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Wizards of the Coast seems to primarily focus on overcoming the barrier of game competency through newcomer play/teaching experiences and online tutorials. This does little to solve the barriers posed by hostile or indifferent idiocultures and their members may bristle at newcomers they view as disruptive. Our participants commented that players would be vocally dismissive of these new popular modes of play (i.e. Commander) and deliberately leave for more competitive tournaments. Organizers could certainly do more to promote a welcoming environment by highlighting the legitimacy of different modes even as they recognize the subcultural distinctions within what seems to be the "same game".

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the gendered dynamics within the MTG community, several limitations should be noted. First, the sample, while reasonably diverse, may not fully capture the broad spectrum of experiences across all non-male players in the MTG community. This limitation is particularly pertinent given the complex and intersectional nature of identity, which may lead to variations in experiences that were not fully represented in this research. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data, gathered through surveys and interviews, introduces potential biases. Participants may have been more inclined to share particularly salient or emotionally charged experiences, potentially skewing the findings toward either highly positive or negative sentiments. The self-selection of participants—recruitment via online forums and local game stores—may have also led to a respondent pool that is not fully representative of the broader MTG player base, as those with strong opinions or experiences related to inclusivity may have been more motivated to participate. Few players outside of North America contributed and so while we suspect similar gender and racial dynamics are at play elsewhere, they could vary.

Lastly, the research primarily focused on gender and inclusivity within the context of MTG play spaces. While efforts were made to account for intersectional factors, including race and economic status, these aspects merit further exploration in future studies to better understand how different axes of identity intersect with gender-based barriers in gaming communities.

By acknowledging these limitations, this study aims to offer a transparent reflection of its scope and provide a foundation for further inquiry into inclusive practices and community dynamics within analog and hybrid gaming spaces. Future research could expand on these findings by employing larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal studies, and deeper analyses of intersecting identities to build upon the themes identified here.

Conclusion

This research underscores the importance of subcultural studies in understanding the dynamics of participation in the MTG community. The question of "who is allowed to participate?" is central to examining how power and exclusion operate within this subculture. Established players' willingness (or lack thereof) to include different groups of people significantly impacts the inclusivity of the community. This study's findings suggest that while there are

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significant barriers, there are also proactive efforts by non-male players to carve out spaces where they can participate fully and equitably. The resilience and adaptability developed through their previous experiences as minorities significantly influence how these players engage with and navigate the MTG community. Their strategies for overcoming barriers are deeply informed by their lifelong experiences of being minorities in other contexts, demonstrating the interplay between personal history and current participatory practices in subcultural spaces. The additional themes identified in this study, particularly the emotional labour required to navigate male-dominated spaces, the strategic use of selective engagement, and the persistent effort to forge mentorship networks, underscore the depth of the challenges faced by marginalized MTG players. These findings highlight the need for intentional inclusivity practices, such as structured mentorship programs and community-supported inclusive events, to alleviate the burden on marginalized players and promote equity within gaming spaces.

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