Reshaping Esports Fandom: Insights into Platformization from B.stage and LCK Communities

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the recent decades, esports has grown immensely in both market size and cultural relevance, with forecasts indicating sustained momentum. Viewership statistics underscore this rapid expansion, rising from 435.7 million global viewers in 2020 to a projected 640.8 million by 2025 (Statista, 2024). This remarkable trajectory has been propelled by a highly participatory fan culture and the continuous advancement of digital platforms. Fans—described as engaged and skilled audiences who enhance media experiences through interpretive and creative practices (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998)—have been central to esports' evolution, which traces its origins to modded fan creations (Jarrett, 2024). Digital platforms like YouTube and Twitch have revolutionized fan engagement, enabling real-time interactions through live chat, fostering emotional bonds with streamers, and introducing effective monetization mechanisms such as subscriptions and donations (Gasparetto & Safronov, 2023). These platforms have facilitated global connectivity, fostering dynamic and vibrant communities that transcend geographical boundaries.

The interplay between online platforms and fan communities has positioned esports as a unique cultural phenomenon reflecting the evolving dynamics of the digital age. (Jin, 2022). While esports fandoms are often compared to traditional sports fandoms, researchers highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of fan diversity

(Barney & Pennington, 2023; Rietz & Hallmann, 2023). No single type of fandom can fully capture the complexities of esports communities (Jarrett, 2024).

The heterogeneity of esports fandoms is evident in the variation of engagement practices and fan identities. Taylor (2012) highlights the tensions between dedicated fans and casual spectators stemming from esports' rapid growth. Yin and Xu (2023) explore the gendered dynamics of fandom, showing how the practices of women and girls challenge the hegemonic masculinity often associated with esports. Furthermore, fan behaviors differ across platforms: Twitch supports live participatory engagement (Taylor, 2018), while X (formerly Twitter) fosters emotive responses during gameplay and analytical discussions during intermissions. Geographic contexts add further complexity. In South Korea, platforms like DCInside, Inven, FM Korea, and PGR foster distinct communities shaped by platform-specific affordances and structures (Jin,2022). Jarrett (2024) advocates for deeper exploration of genre, geography, demographics, and platform-specific dynamics to fully understand esports fandom's evolving nature.

Given this context, this study aims to contribute to esports and fandom literature by examining B.stage, a global fandom platform, and its integration with League of Legends Champions Korea (LCK) teams. The research investigates how B.stage transforms fan engagement and practices, offering insights into the broader evolution of esports fandom and its ecosystem.

B.stage is a global fandom platform akin to Weverse, which was launched in 2019 by HYBE and Naver to enrich fandom culture through tailored fan services and merchandise sales (Shin & Hwang, 2022). By late 2023, Weverse hosted 117 artist communities, garnering 10.5 million Monthly Active Users (MAUs) and 113 million downloads, 90% of which originated from 245 non-Korean countries (WeVerse News, 2023). While similar platforms focused on K-pop, B.stage expanded its scope to include esports, actors, musicals, and digital content creators since its launch in 2021. By August 2024, B.stage reported 3 million MAUs across 230 countries, with significant engagement from regions such as the United States, South Korea, Japan, France, and Brazil (b.stage, 2024). Notably, four LCK teams—T1, Dplus KIA, Gen.G, and KT Rolster—operate active communities on B.stage, alongside U.S.-based esports organization Sentinels, which joined in 2023.

B.stage signifies a fundamental shift within the esports fandom ecosystem, moving from historically decentralized, open platforms like Reddit, Discord, YouTube, and Twitch to a centralized, closed-platform model. By consolidating content streaming, fan communication, and monetization strategies into a single ecosystem, B.stage provides an alternative space for community identity formation and direct player interactions. These private communities differ from traditional open-access fan spaces by offering unique participation opportunities through a monthly membership model. Prior studies on Weverse demonstrate that such models not only unify fandoms but also enhance their commercial value through exclusive content and monetization strategies (Shin & Hwang, 2022; Toneva & Kwak, 2024). Centralized platforms like B.stage exemplify the transformative potential of emerging fan engagement models to reshape audience behaviors and unlock new economic opportunities within esports fandom.

This study, part of a broader longitudinal research project on global esports fandom, employs a three-month digital ethnography of esports fan communities on B.stage.

Digital ethnography is particularly suitable for examining how participants construct meaning in digital social environments (Pink et al., 2016). The study focuses on analyzing platform structure, content offerings, and user interactions with two objectives: (1) a comparative analysis of the four LCK team communities on B.stage and (2) an exploration of how platform affordances and team-specific strategies influence fan engagement practices.

By examining the co-creative interactions between platforms and fandoms and identifying distinct fandom typologies, this research advances scholarly understanding of emerging dynamics within esports culture. It situates itself within broader discussions of digital games' cultural and social significance (Hutchins, 2008; Richardson, Hjorth, & Davies, 2021; Taylor, 2012). Moreover, the findings provide actionable strategies for esports teams to foster long-term sustainability and contribute to the growth of the broader esports ecosystem.

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