

**VIRTUAL WORLDS, REAL CONNECTIONS: INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF USER-GENERATED
CONTENT AND COMMUNITY ON CHINESE FINAL FANTASY XIV PLAYERS**

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Virtual Worlds, Real Connections: Investigating the Role of User-Generated Content and Community on Chinese Final Fantasy XIV Players

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the influence of User-Generated content on player engagement and community dynamics within Final Fantasy XIV, a well-known Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), particularly focusing on the Chinese player community. By conducting in-depth qualitative investigations through semi-structured interviews with Chinese FFXIV players and employing thematic analysis, this study investigates how User-Generated Content shapes gaming experiences and affects community interactions. The findings indicate that user-generated content significantly enhances player engagement, nurtures a vibrant community atmosphere, and allows players to express their identities within the game world.

KEYWORDS: *Game community, Player identity, User-generated content, Digital creativity, Game experience*

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Introduction

Final Fantasy XIV serves as an outstanding representative of the massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) genre. This genre encompasses online video games where a large number of players can engage simultaneously, participating in diverse activities like exploration, combat, and various forms of social interaction within a virtual environment (Lee et al., 2020, p. 33). According to Harviainen and Hamari (2015), MMORPGs are defined as online role-playing games set within expansive virtual worlds. These games host active player bases that can number from tens to thousands to millions, offering a gameplay experience that is not only immersive but also includes a fun, interactive process within these game worlds (p. 1120). These interactions are essential parts of the game, providing players with a rich, engaging environment where they can embark on adventures, tackle challenges, and form social bonds with other players from around the globe. Such extensive interactions contribute to the dynamic and ever-evolving narrative of the game, making each player's experience unique and memorable.

Developed by Square Enix and launched in 2013, Final Fantasy XIV is a part of the iconic Final Fantasy series. Over the years, it has remained a focal point of the gaming world, amassing a devoted player base with over 52 million players globally and nearly one million active players daily, by the time of March 2024 (*FINAL FANTASY XIV: A REALM REBORN PLAYER COUNT*, n.d.). The game unfolds in the fictional realm of Eorzea, where players take the role of an adventurer, the “Warrior of Light”, caught in the strife between Eorzea and the evil empire of Galandrio, battling not only terrestrial foes but also evil forces from other dimensions. As players progress through the game, they reveal more about ancient civilizations, mysterious forces, and deeper truths hidden in the universe. Known for its intricate world-building, immersive storytelling, engaging and dynamic gameplay mechanics, vibrant community interactions, and constantly updated content, Final Fantasy XIV has solidified its position as a leading MMORPG, shaping the gaming landscape and leaving a lasting impact on both players and industry observers alike. Final Fantasy XIV is particularly well known for its great gaming community, and has been awarded “Best Gamer Community” for many years on numerous gaming review sites and forums, such as MMORPG.GG (Daniel, 2024), Game Rant (Nasir, 2023), PC Gamer (Brown, 2024), and many others.

In August 2014, Final Fantasy XIV commenced its expansion into the Chinese gaming market facilitated by its strategic partnership, Shengqu Games (formerly named Shengda Games), as documented in “Final Fantasy XIV Arrives in China” (2014), thereby representing a noteworthy

milestone in its global outreach attempts. This move was preceded by an extensive beta testing phase, during which the game underwent rigorous review and refinement processes aimed at ensuring its readiness and suitability for the Chinese players. It is noteworthy that despite the widespread recognition of the Final Fantasy series since the release of Final Fantasy I in Japan in 1987, none of the games developed ever since had been formally introduced to the Chinese market before Final Fantasy XIV. This introduction marked a historical moment for Square Enix as it ventured into the Chinese market for the first time. Meanwhile, Square Enix planned to release other games such as *Puzzle Bobble* and *RANBU* in collaboration with other Chinese entities within the same year (Square Enix Holdings, 2014). These initiatives were part of a broader strategy to diversify their offerings and strengthen their presence in Asia, reflecting the company's ambition to tap into new segments and capitalize on the region's dynamic gaming industry. This expansion into China not only broadened the reach of Final Fantasy XIV but also showed Square Enix's commitment to becoming a major player in the global gaming landscape, adapting to regional markets and enhancing its economic footprint in the Asian gaming market.

Being a fan of online gaming, I was especially immersed in the universe of Final Fantasy XIV when I started playing this game a few years ago. During my playthrough, I have keenly observed the proliferation of user-generated content that significantly contributes to the rich tapestry of the gaming experience. User-generated content is any content created by users rather than the platform's official creators or administrators. It includes a diverse range of player-created materials such as custom game modifications, fan art, strategy guides, and forum discussions (Duan et al., 2022, p. 2; McKenzie et al., 2012, overview section, para. 1). These contributions, generated by players themselves, reflect their creativity, strategic thinking, and community involvement. Within this vibrant virtual realm, players not only play the game but also actively engage in the creation of guides and tutorials, explanations of in-game mechanics and tricks, fostering a dynamic ecosystem of shared knowledge. Videos featuring game guides, in-game recordings, and music are made to express emotions and creativity. Memes on gaming are generated and disseminated through chatting for amusement. Players would capture screenshots showcasing their characters' outfits (glamour), interactive occasions with other players, and amusing occurrences and share them on social media platforms. User-generated content comes in diverse forms and can be found on official and unofficial gaming forums, social media, and private communications, contributing to a unique layer of enjoyment that extends beyond the confines of the original game. At the same time, players form a closer community in their interactions and knowledge sharing with other players, whether seen as a loose group of players in a broad sense of the word or a small group of players who are

familiar and play with each other in the game. It was in these player-driven contents as well as interactions with other players that I found myself delving deeper into the game experience, discovering new adventures, and forging unforgettable memories. In essence, it is the collaborative efforts and imaginative contributions of players that elevate the gaming experience to new heights, ensuring that the journey never truly ends with the completion of the main storyline.

Online gaming is a fast-paced world where virtual landscapes blend with human connections— breaking barriers of distance and culture. This transformation was eloquently highlighted by Bhagat et al. (2019, p. 453) and Uz & Çağiltay (2015, p. 4). Our research delves deep into the Chinese players' viewpoint in Final Fantasy XIV; we study what drives them, what they see, and how they participate with user-generated content in the game community. The primary goal of this study is to delve deeply into the virtual society and how it is built by its members — yet not only influences players' perception and use of user-generated content but also drives their involvement in producing such content. The investigation seeks to untangle the complex web of personal and collective factors that fuel player engagement with user-created content, underscoring the importance of social connections and cooperative creativity within the digital realm of Final Fantasy XIV. The investigation seeks to reveal the intricate weave of individual and group influences that drive players to participate in creating the game. Its aim is to show how user-created content acts as a trigger that boosts social connections and fosters creativity within a community— thus, improving the quality of the gaming experience. With this study, we hope to add to a better understanding of digital cultures, where user-generated content plays an important role in community-based development efforts among massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) — part of which is also known as taking this into consideration: who is behind the controller.

Chinese players of the game Final Fantasy XIV have been studied in a bid to understand their views on user-generated content which provides an insight into how online gaming communities function. Instead of being a passive observer, the study aimed to know how players habitually see and engage in creating user-generated content thereby emphasizing that this is a community-based activity. This research therefore reveals the importance of digital creativity and social interaction in virtual worlds. Finally, it breaks down the behaviors and attitudes of Chinese gamers towards user-generated content in Final Fantasy XIV. This helps to illustrate how digital platforms contribute to cultural exchange while connecting people from different backgrounds. The game serves as a conduit for cross-cultural interaction, where players collaborate, swap thoughts and produce content together to bridge cultural gaps and create an environment of mutual understanding and oneness. This study examines how digital culture informs the subjective experience of players in a

gaming context, thus strengthening community ties. It also investigates the significance of user-generated content within gaming experiences, and therefore its wider implications for forming communities in online gaming platforms.

The research makes a significant academic contribution to game studies. It does so by looking at various aspects like the dynamics of online gaming communities, digital creativity and social interactions among human beings in virtual environments. The study is based on players' subjective experiences and narratives; such an approach has not only pushed for new methods but also deepened into theoretical debates in this area. One major focus of this investigation is how gamers engage with or create user-generated contents within their respective communities. Consequently, the study seeks to point out new perspectives that will guide future inquiries. Moreover, the interconnected relationships amid users' content, gamers, and gaming platforms are investigated which can give birth to fresh lines of enquiry. The study offers valuable insights towards further exploration and understanding; thus, it contributes largely to ongoing debates in game studies as well as developments in the field. Furthermore, different stakeholders in the gaming industry will find this research invaluable. These insights can be used to enhance player involvement by game makers who incorporate creative features and mechanics in their games. This information can help marketing teams design unique strategies that attract different segments of the gaming community for improved user acquisition and retention. Moreover, a more profound comprehension of the intricate dynamics between user-generated content and community interactions would greatly benefit online gaming communities. Such communities can foster an environment where members feel connected and belonged to through effective management practices leading to a more vibrant and unified gaming ecosystem. What stands out most in this study is the fact that collaboration and innovation are key in shaping the future of gaming.

User-Generated Content has become an indispensable element in online gaming, shaping player experiences globally. Understanding how players perceive and interact with user-generated content, along with the crucial role played by online communities, is critical to uncovering player behavior, preferences, and interactions. These insights not only aid academic advancement but can also provide invaluable guidance to various sectors within the gaming industry (Hofman-Kohlmeyer 2021, pp 76-82). To understand user-generated content more thoroughly, it's essential to place it within specific games, drawing upon both personal experiences and research interests. As such, a research question has been developed which examines its impacts within online gaming environments to understand how user-generated content shapes gaming landscapes and impacts player engagement:

What are the experiences and perceptions of Chinese Final Fantasy XIV players regarding user-generated content?

The main research question is followed by two sub-questions:

1) In what ways do Chinese Final Fantasy XIV players engage with, participate in, or contribute to user-generated content, and what motivates their involvement?

2) How does the sense of community among Chinese Final Fantasy XIV players shape their experiences and perceptions of user-generated content?

After introducing the history and overview of Final Fantasy XIV and mapping out the research relevance within both societal and academic contexts, the next section of this thesis will present a theoretical framework. This framework will explore the impact of user-generated content in online gaming, particularly focusing on its effects within the Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) community. It will incorporate Uses and Gratifications Theory to explain why players engage with user-generated content and highlight the gratifications they derive from these interactions. Additionally, it will examine the concept of social identity within online gaming communities, demonstrating how user-generated content helps to foster a sense of belonging and shared identity among players.

Following the theoretical discussions, the methodology used in this research will be described. This section will explain the qualitative approach taken, including the use of semi-structured interviews to collect data from ten Chinese participants involved in Final Fantasy XIV. It will also detail the participant recruitment process and the thematic analysis used to interpret the interview findings.

The results section will then present an analysis of the insights gained from the interviews, focusing on the impact of user-generated content on player engagement, community dynamics, and individual experiences within the gaming environment. This analysis seeks to reveal how user-generated content contributes to a vibrant community culture among players.

Finally, the thesis will conclude by synthesizing the research findings, discussing the broader implications of user-generated content for player interaction and community cohesion within the Final Fantasy XIV realm.

Theoretical Framework

User-generated content in the gaming context

By discussing the term broadly, Bruns (2016) defines user-generated content as “a generic term that encompasses a wide range of media and creative content types that were created or at least substantially co-created by [...] contributors working outside of conventional professional environments (p. 1)”. Although user-generated content in both digital and non-digital format have long history, the term is widely recognized especially “in the early years of the new millennium and is often referred to as the emergence of ‘Web 2.0’ (Ibid.)” during which participative web design and practices took place. In the Web 2.0 era, user-generated content has gained prominence due to the availability of free publishing tools, enabling individuals to express viewpoints that were previously marginalized by corporate media (Leung, 2009, p. 1328). Santos (2021) demonstrates deconstruction and an interdisciplinary conversation on user-generated content, based upon which he offers an updated definition of user-generated content: “any kind of text data or action performed by online digital systems users, published and disseminated by the same user through independent channels, that incur an expressive or communicative effect either on an individual manner or combined with other contributions from the same or other sources (p. 108)”, encompassing text, pictures, videos, and more, voluntarily shared by users on various online platforms, reflecting personal opinions, feelings, and thoughts (Song et al., 2020, p. 7). Up to today, user-generated content is usually considered as the publicly available content over the Internet that reflects a certain amount of creative effort, created outside of professional routines and practices (OECD, 2007, p. 1). Technological advancements have notably reshaped the landscape of user-generated content over the years. The proliferation of sophisticated mobile technologies made social media platforms more accessible and thus became instrumental in facilitating the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Fragoso, 2019, p. 2), and the continuous advances in information and communication technologies have further strengthened the production, sharing, and access of user-generated content among millions of users globally (Massa & Campagna, 2016, p. 402). Advances in digital technology not only provide opportunities for creators and audiences, it also opens up potential possibilities for businesses and investors. For example, the opportunity to gather vast amounts and varieties of data leads to the emergence of User-Generated Big Data (UGBD) (Trabucchi et al., 2017, p. 43), referring to the data generated as end-users interact with digital products that present new avenues for understanding user behaviors and preferences. Businesses increasingly use social media platforms as key channels for value co-creation with customers and viewers, enabling both parties to

actively engage in content creation and sharing, thereby influencing business models and profit generation (Ketonen-Oksi et al., 2016, pp. 1828-1830).

User-generated content, in the gaming context, in conjunction with the above definitions, refers to content created and shared by members within the gaming community. This content can include a wide range of materials such as gameplay videos, reviews, forum and social media posts, in-game creations, modifications, tools, and social media interactions related to gaming experiences (Duan et al., 2022, p. 2; McKenzie et al., 2012, overview section, para. 1). User-generated content significantly enriches the online gaming landscape as it enhances players' understanding and perception by providing tips, feedback, and reviews from the gaming community. The authenticity and diversity of user-generated content contribute to a vibrant and engaging gaming environment. User-generated content leads to the creation of user-centric media models, democratizing information sharing, and content creation (Triono et al., 2021, p. 27). Kim (2014) as well, praises the democratic and creative aspects of user-generated content in her article on the user-generated content of the game *Animal Crossing: Wild World*. User-generated content is considered a democratic and productive form of contribution and interaction, and the communication, as well as coordination between players, are huge contributors to user-generated content (p. 366). Research by Yee (2006) and Williams et al. (2008) indicates that massively multiplayer online games (MMORPGs) are valuable research platforms where millions of users interact daily thus fostering vibrant communities where users engage and collaborate. The content, not controlled by game developers, but rather emerges organically from the users themselves, contribute to a sense of authenticity and diversity within the gaming environment. Additionally, user-generated content creates a sense of belonging and social connections within the gaming community, enhancing the overall gaming experiences, according to Sjöblom and Hamari's (2017) research on the motivations of Twitch audiences (p. 18). From a business perspective, Geng & Chen (2021) emphasize that user-generated content can affect gamers' decisions as consumers, including purchase intentions, by providing valuable insights and information shared by fellow gamers (p. 9). The credibility and quality of user-generated content are crucial, shaping how players perceive and interact with gaming content.

Identity formation in game worlds

Players shape their identities in game worlds through a complex interplay of factors. Virtual environments provide individuals with the opportunity to transform their self-representations (Yee

& Bailenson, 2007, p. 272). These transformations can lead to altered self-perceptions during gameplay, where players adopt attributes of their in-game characters, such as courage and power (Hefner et al., 2007, p. 45). The games played, patterns of play, and the perceived relationship with gaming in general all influence how players define themselves as gamers, according to Stone's (2019) research on self-identification as players among 238 college students (p. 2612). Stone's research also points out that MMORPGs' social interactivity has challenged the stereotypical image of "gamers", i.e. the young, heterosexual, white males with negative attributes (p. 2609). Yee (2006) notes that players derive meaningful relationships, emotional experiences, and even leadership skills from virtual environments (p. 36).

O'Brien & Toms (2008) stress the importance of user engagement with technology, noting that features like multiple perspectives and realistic graphics are crucial for online gamers (p. 17). MMORPGs serve as platforms where individuals can interact and collaborate using real-time 3D avatars, allowing them to enact aspects of their ideal selves through constructed Characters (Bessièrè et al., 2007, p. 531). Players explore new identities within virtual communities that facilitates the formation of social relationships that expose individuals to diverse worldviews. The manipulation of identity within MMORPGs is a significant aspect of gameplay, with studies showing that players engage in gender swapping and derive satisfaction from exploring different aspects of their identities within these games (King et al., 2009, p. 97). Players internalize their gaming experiences into their self-concept, highlighting the dynamic ways in which identity construction occurs in MMORPGs (Guegan et al., 2015, p. 349). Social interactions play a crucial role in shaping players' identity within MMORPGs, with features like guilds offering autonomy for users to choose their experiences and form relationships with the game world (Jin et al., 2017, p. 412). Based on the former research on identity formation, it seems proper to conclude that players shape their identities in MMORPGs through a combination of ideal self-exploration, social interactions, community engagement, and the internalization of gaming experiences into their self-concept.

User-generated content influences players' identity formation significantly within the gaming environment. Players interact with user-generated content in various ways, including consuming content for information, entertainment, and mood management needs, engaging with other users to enhance social connections and virtual communities, and creating their own content for self-expression and self-actualization (Shao, 2009, p. 7), allowing users to construct a certain image of themselves and claim identities, and to experiment with different facets of who they are (Ibid., p. 14). Gameplay experiences not only shape players' perceptions of the game but also form the basis for player identity formation (Khrypko et al., 2023, p. 6), and players' interaction with user-generated

content enables them to enhance the experiences by, for example, being given the opportunity to customize their characters, to self-motivate as they immerse themselves in the virtual world (Georgiou & Demiris, 2017, p. 267), and to shape and preserve their online social identities within gaming communities (Allein et al., 2021, Introduction section, para. 2). In these ways, user-generated content acts as a versatile medium for expressing and experimenting with identity.

Reasons behind engagement: the Uses and Gratifications Theory

In order to gain a deeper understanding of players' interaction with and creation of user-generated content, the Uses and Gratifications Theory is introduced in this specific context. The methodology of Uses and Gratifications has been proposed since the 1940s to study the attraction and retention of audience satisfaction with media types and content types that fulfill their social and psychological needs (Cantril, 1942). Specific audience-based Uses and Gratification Theory, conducted in a social psychological model, was proposed by McQuail (1994). Ruggiero (2000), in his historical analysis of Uses and Gratifications Theory, mentions that "Theoretically and practically [...], the basic questions remain the same. Why do people become involved in one particular type of mediated communication or another, and what gratifications do they receive from it? (p. 29)". Ruggiero argues that the flexibility of Uses and Gratifications Theory for communicative contexts after the rapid realization of new communication technologies makes it widely applicable (Ibid., p. 28). The theory provides a valuable framework for understanding why individuals actively seek out media to satisfy specific needs and desires, and in the context of online gaming, why gamers interact with or create user-generated content within the gaming environment, particularly within vibrant communities such as that of Final Fantasy XIV.

Uses and Gratifications Theory focuses on individuals' active role in selecting and using media to fulfill specific needs and obtain gratifications (Whiting & Williams, 2013, pp. 362-363). In the context of gaming, Uses and Gratifications Theory has been applied to predict player usage patterns and motivations (Bonny & Castaneda, 2022, p. 159). Studies have shown that Uses and Gratifications Theory can provide insights into the gratifications derived from digital games, leading to a better understanding of player experiences. It serves as a valuable framework for understanding the motivations behind individuals' engagement with various types of games, and has been applied to investigate, for example, why individuals choose to play multiplayer mobile games (Gupta & Mathur, 2022, p. 3), how they satisfy their needs through online gaming (Huang et al., 2015, p. 193), and what motivates them to continue playing (Huang & Hsieh, 2011, p. 581). Previous analyses of

games and gamers, such as Puspitasari et al. (2018), used a Uses-and-Gratifications-Theory-based model that analyzed questionnaire information from 453 multiplayer video game players and was able to derive the most likely reason why players choose to play a game consistently for seeking gratifications such as achievement, social interaction, and escapism (p. 137). In Chuang's (2015) examination of the ways in which knowledge is used and fulfilled during knowledge sharing in MMORPG communities as well as the feeling of virtual community, he concludes that Uses and Gratifications Theory affects knowledge sharing through the feeling of virtual community. Chuang creates a model to try to capture the dynamics of knowledge-sharing behaviors in MMORPG communities. In this model, he argues that virtual communities "satisfy the features of uses and gratifications, which potentially encourages the advancement of relationships and increases the sense of belonging of the virtual community (p. 474)".

Through the above research on how players form identities in virtual worlds and on Uses and Gratifications Theory in the gaming environment, it can be seen that players' interactions with and creations of user-generated content can further enable them to acquire different gratifications and shape and confirm their online identities. This connection is crucial for understanding the interplay between Uses and Gratifications Theory and identity in the context of user-generated content. The gratifications obtained from engaging with user-generated content, including knowledge sharing, community belonging, and entertainment, directly represent a potential reason why players contribute to or consume content like mods, fan art, strategy guides, videos, memes, and discussion forums, etc. Through user-generated content consumption, participation, and production, individuals express themselves, seek feedback, enhance social connections, and develop critical skills, all of which are essential in defining and affirming their online personas.

Social identity in online gaming communities

Based on the previous research on user-generated content, the motivations of players' interaction with and creation of it, and how these actions play a significant role in shaping and confirming players' online identities, I want to dedicate this section to the communal aspects of identity within the Final Fantasy XIV community, focusing on the sense of belonging and shared social identity.

According to Diaz (2000), a community is a structure of social relations in which there are social ties among members of the community that occur in a specific geographic area or virtual space, constrained by a set of shared patterns of behavior and common goals (para. 7). People in a

community feel a sense of belonging to the group and fulfill their physical and social needs through daily interactions with each other (Ibid., definitions section, para. 2-6). When it comes to network science, a community is a set of nodes that are more densely connected to each other than to the rest of the network (Derényi et al., 2005, p. 1). This concept of communities in networks is crucial across various disciplines, including media and game studies.

Online communities have become increasingly prevalent, especially with the rise of social media and the internet. The development of Web technology and the deregulation of the Internet at the end of the 20th century contributed to the rapid growth of online/ digital communities that fulfill two basic human desires, namely, connecting with others, and acquiring knowledge (Plant, 2004, p. 51). Plant identifies a three-dimensional categorization that creates nine divisions of online community spaces (Ibid., p. 59), which will help in exploring the subtle effects different aspects of online communities may have on the perception of user-generated content. These virtual communities allow individuals to connect, share information, and engage with others who have similar interest or goals (Bilal et al., 2022, p. 22). An online gaming community falls into the category of virtual communities as a specific type of online community centered around (specific) video games. Members of online gaming communities come together to play games, discuss strategies, and share experiences related to gaming that often fosters a sense of camaraderie and shared interest among gamers, enhancing their overall gaming experience (Hsu & Lu, 2004, p. 856).

To investigate Chinese Final Fantasy XIV players' sense of belonging to gaming communities and its impact on how they perceive, consume, and generate user-generated content, I introduce the Social Identity Approach proposed by Postmes & Branscombe (2010). This approach attempts to manage confusion between two psychological theories that intersect but remain distinct: self-categorization theory and social identity theory (p. 2). Cwil's (2020) study on gamers' self-identity emphasizes two terms. Social identity refers to how people view themselves within social groups and environments, whereas self-categorization refers to how individuals form mental models that categorize groups (p. 788). Hogg & Reid (2006) emphasize the formation of shared social identities within communities as the cornerstone of belonging and connection among group members (Hogg & Reid 2006, p. 9). According to this approach, individuals' feelings, values, beliefs, and actions all shape their sense of self (Sieger et al 2016 p. 544).

In the context of online games, the social identity approach can help us better understand how players form a common identity based on their shared interest in the game. According to Brown (2000), social identity arises from members' self-identification as members of a group and their

interactions with others in the group (p. 761). Online gaming communities like Final Fantasy XIV allow individuals to build identities around their gaming experiences (Chuang 2020a, p. 1). Players build connections, norms, and values within these communities that contribute to a collective identity (Willson, 2015, p. 15). As previously mentioned, engaging in user-generated content activities in gaming communities provides players with an opportunity to express a shared identity, connect with like-minded people, and build a sense of belonging (Chuang 2020a, p. 8). Research has also shown that participation in user-generated content activities promotes stronger social interactions and connections within the gaming community (O'Conner et al 2015, p. 459). Through these activities, players collaborate in content creation, sharing experiences, and cooperation, fostering a sense of community and common identity (Pietersen et al.) This collaborative participation helps to foster social capital, including resources, relationships, and support systems available within the community (Kaye et al.). Based on the relevant research, it can be concluded that participation in user-generated content within online gaming communities It can be concluded from relevant research that participation in user-generated content within an online gaming community fosters collaboration, content creation, and social interactions among players, thereby enhancing the social identity of the community. These activities enhance players' sense of belonging, promote community participation, and improve the overall gaming experience for individuals within the community. Within the framework of this study, the Social Identity Approach helps explain how players' sense of belonging to the Final Fantasy XIV gaming community influences their perceptions of user-generated content and their interactions with it, thus the approach could be seen as another foundation for the following section of developing the methodology.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the theoretical framework presented offers a comprehensive understanding of how user-generated content shapes both individual identities and community dynamics within online gaming environments, particularly focusing on Chinese players of Final Fantasy XIV. This exploration begins by defining user-generated content and its significant role in modern gaming culture, then delves into how it serves as an important tool for personal expression and social interaction among players. User-generated content allows players to create, share, and participate in content that is not only entertaining, but also deeply personal and reflective of who they are. In the virtual worlds of massively multiplayer online role-playing games such as Final Fantasy XIV, players utilize user-generated content to present different aspects of their characters through customization, narrative contributions, and interactive play. These activities allow players to experiment with self-

expression and explore their identities in a safe, controlled environment, which is particularly appealing in the context of online interaction and identity formation.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory furthers our understanding by explaining the motivations behind players' engagement with user-generated content. According to the Uses and Gratifications Theory, players are attracted to user-generated content because it fulfills their various needs, such as knowledge sharing and receiving, entertainment, self-expression, getting feedback, and enhancing social connections. Therefore, for the researcher, every interaction with user-generated content is not just a casual engagement, but a meaningful action that fulfills a specific psychological or social desire.

Transitioning from individual experiences to collective dynamics, the social identity approach provides an umbrella through which the impact of user-generated content on society as a whole can be assessed. This approach demonstrates how user-generated content can help foster a sense of community among players. Collective content creation and interaction in a gaming environment produces a shared identity forged from common interests and experiences. Sharing a common identity enhances the gaming experience, giving players a sense of connection and solidarity that transcends the virtual boundaries of the game. user-generated content can have a significant impact on the gaming industry, transforming the traditional format into a more vibrant and participatory one, where players are not only consumers, but also creators and community builders. Exploring user-generated content through this theoretical lens provides insight into the intricate relationship between individual agency and community interaction in the digital gaming environment.

In short, user-generated content can be seen as a core element of the Final Fantasy XIV game experience, bridging the gap between individual creativity and community engagement. The theoretical framework provides an important perspective on the social dynamics of cyberspace, emphasizing the transformative power of user contributions in shaping digital culture. The framework lays the groundwork for further research into the ways in which players experience and perceive user-generated content and their motivations, as well as whether user-generated content has the significance to influence player behavior and community cohesion.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative research design to investigate to the Chinese players' perceptions, interactions, and community roles in Final Fantasy XIV regarding user-generated content. The use of qualitative interviews as the primary data collection technique provides for an immersive and in-depth examination of players' experiences and interpretations derived from user-generated content engagement. This method aligns with the exploratory goals of this study, which seeks to uncover nuanced insights into social dynamics and individual motivations within a game's community. The qualitative approach was chosen due to its strength in capturing the rich, complex interpersonal dynamics, as well as individuals' subjective experiences in specific settings.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews

This study employs qualitative interviews, which will be semi-structured, to delve into the perceptions, interactions, and community roles of Chinese Final Fantasy XIV players concerning user-generated content. This approach allows for a rich, exploratory understanding of players' experiences and the meanings they derive from their engagement with user-generated content and community participation. According to Warren's (2001) article in Handbook of Interview Research, qualitative interviewing is a form of guided conversation (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995, as cited in Warren, 2001, p. 4) that is quite open and exploratory. Its participants are more likely to be viewed as "meaning makers" (Ibid., p. 2), aiming to draw interpretations and make sense of their experiences and life worlds from conversations with interviewees. It involves engaging a purposeful conversation with participants to gather their perspectives, feelings, perceptions, and experiences (Holloway, 1997, as cited in Cho & DeVaney, 2010, p. 390). The methodology is closely related and linked to ethnographic research; but when the topic of interest to the researcher is to "establishing common patterns or themes among particular types of respondents (Warren, 2001, p. 5)", researchers often choose qualitative interviews over ethnographic methods. Semi-structured interviews is a form of qualitative interviews. According to O'Keefe et al. (2015), it involves a flexible yet organized approach to data collection through open-ended questions guided by a predetermined set of topics or themes (p. 8222). The interview questions will be developed based on the research question(s) and the theoretical framework of this research, ensuring consistency across interviews while also allowing for spontaneity and detailed responses from participants.

Qualitative interviews are an effective means of studying game players due to their ability to capture all aspects of player-game interaction (Wannes & Poels 2009, p. 8). While conducting

qualitative interviews can pose methodological difficulties due to needing effective relationships in the gaming industry and community settings (King et al. 2009, p. 555), qualitative interviews remain powerful tools for understanding player behavior and experiences. Qualitative interviews enable in-depth explorations into gamers' interactions with user-generated content such as user-generated content that reveal motivations, preferences, and challenges (Naeem & Ozuem 2022, p 187).

Participant recruitment and sampling

This study will employ a comprehensive recruitment strategy in order to collect a diverse sample of Chinese players of Final Fantasy XIV who actively participate in creating and sharing user-generated content. The recruitment will blend targeted outreach on specific platforms with snowball sampling to broaden participant diversity and reach. In the recruitment process for this study, the inclusion criteria are designed to ensure a focused yet comprehensive exploration of active engagement with user-generated content among the Final Fantasy XIV players.

The platforms for recruitment are: 1) RED (Xiaohongshu): known for its lifestyle and review content (Wan, 2022, para. 4-5), RED will be used to identify players who actively document and share their Final Fantasy XIV experiences; 2) Weibo: a widely-used micro-blogging site/app that is ideal for reaching a broad audience of gamers who frequently discuss their gameplay experiences and insights, both on their personal pages and Weibo's Final Fantasy XIV player community; 3) Douyin (TikTok): this platform will be utilized to connect with users who engage with Final Fantasy XIV through creative short video content.

Recruitment process

1. Initial contact: potential participants will be contacted via direct messages on the platforms where they are active. An introductory message will outline the study's purpose, the nature of their involvement, and the voluntary basis of participation.
2. Snowball sampling: Following initial interviews, participants will be asked to recommend other players who meet the criteria and are willing to participate in this study. This approach will help tap into wider networks within the Final Fantasy XIV community.
3. A detailed consent form will be provided to ensure participants are fully aware of their rights, the voluntary nature of the study, and the confidentiality measures in place. The consent form

used for participant agreement is included in Appendix A.

4. Once participants are confirmed, interviews will be scheduled at their convenience to ensure a comfortable and private environment for discussion.

Sampling criteria

Participants in this study must be actively engaging with Final Fantasy XIV on any of the Chinese servers, and have a history of sharing, interacting, or creation of user-generated content. Such engagement includes a wide range of activities, for example, posting (original) artwork, writing game guides, creating gameplay videos, and participating in online community discussions, etc., as long as they fit in the theoretical definition of the engagement with user-generated content and beneficial for representing the diverse ways in which players contribute to and experience the game's community culture. All participants are required to be adults, aged 18 years or older, to ensure that all participants can legally provide informed consent and are capable of reflecting on and articulating their experiences and opinions freely and independently.

The study aims to recruit a diverse and representative sample of 10 adults Chinese Final Fantasy XIV players. Interviews, designed to last between 45 to 60 minutes, will be conducted outside of the game environment via online phone calls, to provide an environment for focused and reflective discussions free from the distractions of the gaming environment. All interviews will be conducted with full respect for the participants' privacy. Interviews will be audio-recorded with explicit consent from each participant to ensure transparency in the handling of the data. Recordings will be transcribed and translated into English to aid in analysis and all transcripts will be securely stored, adhering to strict confidentiality and ethical standards in handling and storing sensitive information. The set of interview questions will be included in Appendix B.

Ethical Considerations

A key ethical consideration in the interviewing process is how to properly manage the social distance between the researcher and participants, given the interactive and immersive nature of the research environment. Active participation within the game for recruitment can lead to various degrees of personal relationships with participants. To maintain the integrity of the research, a clear professional boundary should be taken into consideration throughout the study, to ensure that the role of the researcher - as both a participant in the game and as a scholarly investigator - are clearly

communicated and maintained.

Informed consent is foundational to the ethical conduct of this research. Participants will be informed about the study's objectives, the usage of collected data, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence to their in-game or social standing. Confidentiality will be ensured with all interview data being anonymized, with identifiable information securely stored and access strictly controlled. The results obtained from the analysis of the interviews will be shared back with the participants in a respectful manner, ensuring that participants and the broader community have the possibility to benefit from the insights gained.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis will be employed to examine the data collected from semi-structured interviews with the participants. As outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is highly flexible and adaptable and can accommodate different research focuses. They identify the method as "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes the data set in (rich) detail (p. 79)". Thematic analysis is valuable for analyzing qualitative interviews due to its flexibility and accessibility. It allows for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns of meaning within the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). Its widespread usage extends to both social and organizational settings, where it serves as an effective tool for offering concise descriptions and interpretations of themes and patterns of a data base (Majumdar, 2019, p. 604).

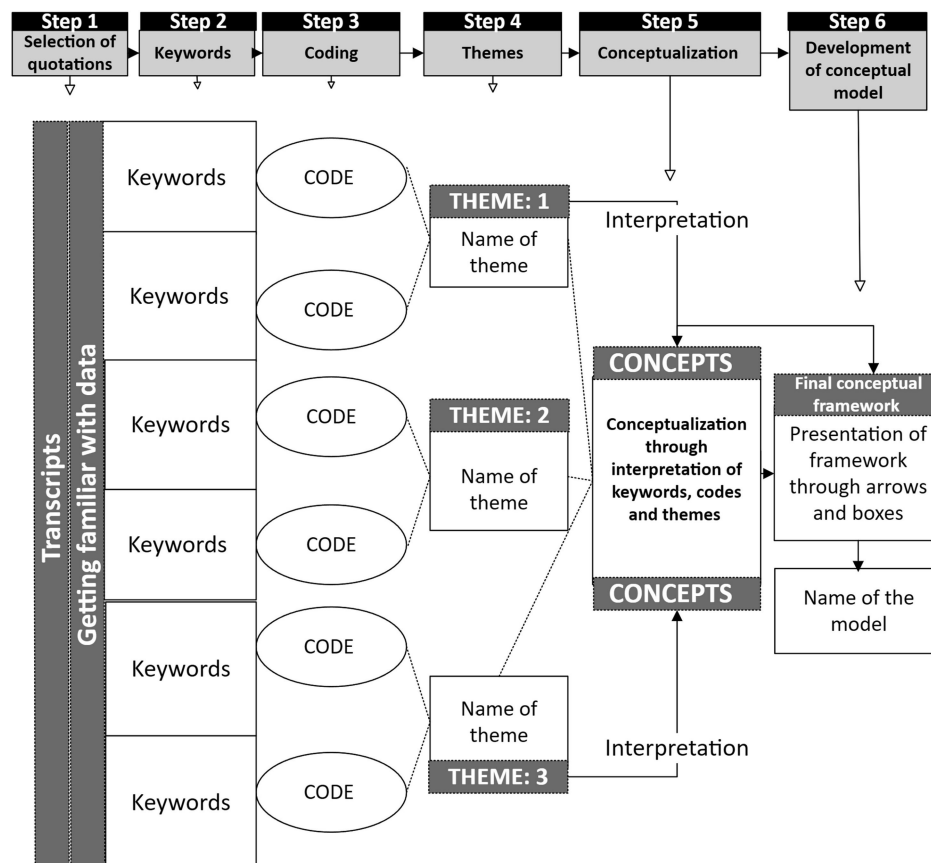
To better explore the research question and sub-questions and to resonate with the theoretical framework, I have chosen to employ deductive thematic analysis as the methodology for analyzing the data collected from the semi-structured interviews, primarily driven by the specific research questions and the theoretical framework already established in earlier sections of the study. Deductive thematic analysis is a valuable method for analyzing interview transcripts due to its structured and theory-driven approach. According to Vaismoradi et al. (2013), by utilizing a predetermined theoretical framework or existing theories, researchers can systematically analyze interview data to identify and interpret themes that align with the chosen theoretical perspective (p. 401). This method allows for a focused examination of specific aspects of the data based on established theories, enabling researchers to delve deeper into the underlying concepts and patterns

present in the transcripts (Gaughan et al., 2022, p. 3). Deductive thematic analysis allows the researcher to categorize the data based on general themes derived from the interview guide and to identify new themes that may emerge during the analysis (Giovanardi et al., 2020, p. 4). This approach offers a systematic method for organizing and making sense of interview data to gain a comprehensive understanding of it. In the case of this study, data exploration allows for in-depth examination and the identification of themes resonating with prior research findings. I discovered underlying themes highlighting players' complex relationships with user-generated content, their motivations for creating or engaging with it, and its effects on communities - thus giving greater nuanced interpretation to interviews conducted for this research project. Lastly, this process also helped me discover whether any correlations existed between the themes identified and prior findings.

The process of thematic analysis in this study will follow the steps described in Naeem et al. (2023)'s manual on thematic analysis in qualitative research, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

A systematic thematic analysis process: A novel six-step process for conceptual model development in qualitative research. Naeem et al. (2023)



Initially, the interview transcripts will be carefully analyzed through open coding. During this initial phase, the data will be scrutinized to identify and label emerging concepts and categories, which are essential to a full understanding of the raw data. In this process, I will draw on and utilize pre-existing theories and knowledge about user-generated content, identity formation, and community dynamics discussed in the theoretical framework as an aid to help identify specific themes anticipated in prior research. Following open coding, I will proceed with theme development. In this phase, the previously identified codes will be organized and refined into broader themes. This step involves examining the relationships between codes and grouping them into categories that more effectively capture the nature of the data. The use of a deductive approach at this stage helps to align these themes with the pre-determined research objectives, ensuring that they accurately reflect the intended theoretical insights based on the existing literature. The final stage is conceptualization, which involves synthesizing the themes to construct a cohesive narrative. This process integrates the distilled themes with the established theoretical framework, discussing in detail how the findings relate to and extend existing knowledge and theory.

As part of this analytical process, great care will be taken to ensure that deductive thematic analysis remains rigorous and transparent in order to permit for methodical and verifiable interpretation of findings. This ensures relevance with theoretical foundations as well as reliability of findings; its insights may provide deeper understandings into social dynamics in MMORPGs such as player interactions or community cohesion due to user-generated content; it also can provide key information on ways to enhance player engagement strategies or community management techniques.

Results

This section presents the findings and results of a thematic analysis of ten semi-structured interview transcripts discussing Chinese Final Fantasy XIV players' interactions with user-generated content, the dynamics of those interactions, and the influence of the player community on players' interactions with user-generated content. All data were obtained from and only from conversations with ten interviewees ranging from 39 to 52 minutes in length, and basic background information on each of the ten interviewees is presented in Appendix C. The coding methodology for the interview data strictly followed the procedures laid out in Naeem et al.'s (2023) Handbook of Qualitative Analysis, which included open coding, thematic development, and categorization steps. Initially, the open coding process identified 93 different codes from the transcripts that reflected a wide range of experiences and perceptions related to user-generated content. These codes were then organized during the theme development stage into 13 themes, exploring the intricacies of player engagement and the complex influences of community dynamics. These themes were subsequently synthesized into three main categories: 1) Player Engagement and Motivation for user-generated content; 2) Community Influence on user-generated content Experiences; and 3) Other/ Cross-Cutting Themes that bridge multiple aspects of the findings. The detailed coding tree, containing the progression from open codes to themes and categories, is provided in Appendix D for reference.

This analysis aims to map out the complex interactions between players and user-generated content within Final Fantasy XIV but also to understand how these interactions are shaped by both personal motivations and communal influences. Each theme developed from the core categories directly addresses the research questions by exploring what drives player engagement with user-generated content and how these experiences are influenced by the community, with insights into what motivates players to engage with user-generated content, how they contribute to and derive value from this content, and the extent to which community norms and practices influence these behaviors, and vice versa, the extent to which the players' interaction with user-generated content has shaped the community culture. Furthermore, findings also suggest user-generated content's role as a medium through which personal identities are expressed and negotiated.

Player engagement and motivation for user-generated content

As each interview progressed to the point where we began to talk about user-generated content, in order for the participants to further understand the interview and be able to talk about their experiences in more depth, I gave a definition of user-generated content in the gaming context,

namely: user-generated content, in the gaming context, refers to content created and shared by gamers within the gaming community. This content can include a wide range of materials such as gameplay videos, reviews, forums and social media posts, and other content. This content can include a wide range of materials such as gameplay videos, reviews, forum and social media posts, in-game creations, modifications, tools, and social media interactions related to gaming experiences (Duan et al., 2022, p. 3). al., 2022, p. 2; McKenzie et al., 2012, overview section, para. 1). Participants were involved in more user-generated content than the examples given in the definition, showing the diversity of the types of user-generated content they encountered, interacted with, and created, both inside and outside of gaming. According to the theme "Types of user-generated content", the types of user-generated content mentioned by the participants include:

Game guides and walkthroughs. Many players rely on and contribute to detailed game guides and walkthroughs. These guides are crucial for mastering complex game mechanics and strategies, especially beneficial for new players. For example, Player #8 is a newcomer to Final Fantasy XIV and thus mainly look up for guide videos and beginner guides, to help him better understand the background and mechanics of the game, and enhance his performance in the game: "As a beginner, the user-generated content I mainly encounter are some game guide videos and beginner guides. These contents are very helpful to me, for example, some content creators on Bilibili will explain in details how to complete specific tasks, how to improve combat effectively, and some suggestions for equipment and skill combinations". Player #9, as a more experienced player, "frequently use and contribute to detailed game guides and walkthroughs, [...] which are essential for mastering complex game mechanics and strategies".

Screenshots and glamour sharing. Players actively engage in sharing screenshots and glamour setups. Glamour, in Final Fantasy XIV, refers to the outfit of the character, with a high degree of freedom to mix and match. This activity is popular for its creative aspect and allows players to showcase their aesthetics. Player #7 is a fan of both: "[...] Recently, I've also collaborated with other players to create videos sharing glamour setups".

Mods that enhance gameplay quality or simplify in-game tasks are commonly used and appreciated within the community. For example, Player #6 enjoys the plug-in mod that helps him to look up the market board price of an object, and Player #1 and #2 highly appreciated the crafting plug-in mods that help them with simplifying the repetitive crafting process.

Fan art and Cosplay. The community actively engages with fan art and cosplay, celebrating the game's artistry and character design outside the digital world. A quote from Player #9 to

showcase her passion for cosplaying: "I also go to comic cons offline and cosplay characters as NPCs or my OC and I would upload the photos online".

Game Music Videos (GMVs) and creative videos. Player interact with, as well as create and share videos that range from GMVs to creative narrative pieces, often using the game's rich lore and aesthetics as a backdrop. In her way to explore more possibilities of video-making, Player #7 claims that she often make GMVs featuring game characters.

Character stories and role-playing. Personalized stories and role-playing scenarios are crafted by players to deepen their character's backstory and engage with the community on a narrative level.

Interactive and collaborative projects. Events and projects created by players for players, such as seasonal festivals or custom quests, demonstrate the collaborative spirit of the community. For example, Player #9 mentioned, "One of the most memorable experiences I've had in Final Fantasy XIV involved a community-created event centered around a seasonal festival in the game".

Social media posts and interactions. Interaction with content on social media platforms helps players stay connected with the community and discover new content ideas and discussions. Almost every participant are involved in different social media platforms on a certain degree, given the fact that they are recruited from these platform.

With various types of user-generated content covered in the conversations and listed above, I would like to further explore the motivations that drive the Chinese players of Final Fantasy XIV to engage with user-generated content. The findings reveal how user-generated content not only enhances gaming experience, but also fosters a deeper connection between players and the game.

The motivations of players' engagement with user-generated content include:

To gain mastery and skill advancement through user-generated content. Players often engage with user-generated content to enhance their mastery of game mechanics, to overcome challenges, to simplify the repetitive actions, and to gain deeper understanding of the game, as well as to discover game content that they are not very familiar with. By engaging with user-generated content, players experience a sense of accomplishment that fuels their continued interest in the game. The desire for skill advancement and deeper understanding of game content encourages players to seek out and creat user-generated content. For players, especially the few participants with less gaming seniority - as in the case of several of the players I cited, their gaming seniority ranged from 1 month to a maximum of 6 months - one of the most important motivation of engaging with user-generated content is to gain mastery and skill advancement.

Examples retrieved from the interviews:

Player #1: "I often look up other players' experiences to see if there's a more convenient method or how others handle things".

Player #2: "Macros are mostly based on strategies that teach me what to do, and I follow them to achieve my gaming goals".

Player #4: "When I play something I'm not good at, I first search for other people's guides or look for related fun stuff".

Player #8: "Once, I encountered a very difficult task in the game and tried several times without success... I tried the method in the video and finally succeeded".

Creative expression and identity affirmation via user-generated content. user-generated content provides a platform for players to express their identities and creativity. This was particularly evident in how players customized their characters and shared these creations with other community members. Throughout the conversations, it can be concluded that participants consider user-generated content as a tool and medium to express their creativity, passion and emotions; Through engaging deeply with user-generated content, especially for those participants who create their own content, they gain identity affirmation through positive feedback to their personal stories, professionalism, aesthetics, thus building confidence and derive emotional and social fulfillment.

Examples retrieved from the interviews:

Player #5: "When I create or interact with user-generated content in Final Fantasy XIV, it's like I'm putting a piece of myself into the game...It's really about making my mark and connecting with others who get it".

Player #6: "It also gave me a chance to know more about the generally considered minor communities, like LGBTQ, colored people, interracial identify, etc.; people project part of themselves on their OC, and by knowing more about these communities and their thoughts, I can know how to better express my own identity and thoughts".

Player #7: "It's really just a passion of mine. Thanks to my background in graphic design and video editing, I have the skills to bring my ideas to life".

Player #8: "By sharing my gaming experience and insights, I can showcase my thinking and creativity, while also resonating with other players".

Player #10: "At least a part of me - the little girl who's passionate about arts".

Interacting with user-generated content for enjoyment and relieving stress. Almost all participants have mentioned their preference for fun content, which works not only as enjoyment,

but also material to share with friends and enhance the community bonds. Some players mentioned that they turn to user-generated content as a source of enjoyment and a means to relieve stress. This was particularly apparent in players' interactions with content that was humorous or whimsical.

Examples retrieved from the interviews:

Player #4: "I mainly post on Xiaohongshu (RED), Weibo, and my own QQ Zone, and I mostly just browse for fun elsewhere".

Player #5: "Gameplay videos are a staple in the community as they help players learn new tactics, appreciate high-level play, and enjoy comedic content created by other players".

Player #6: "I think it definitely enhanced my gaming experience, although more from a neutral, 'I use this for my own fun' way"; "[...] so now I'm just enjoying my own head-canons and having fun with my own characters".

Player #7: "I enjoy funny derivative works, optimized guides, or informational videos about the game".

Player #10: "Classes are usually pretty stressful, and I don't always like the paintings I do, but creating outside of class is more freeing for me".

User-generated content's role in enhancing gaming experience, by introducing new gameplay elements and narratives that are not available through official channels, allowing players to overcome challenges and improve efficiency, as well as to add narrative to the original story, thus strengthen the emotional bonds between players and game characters.

Examples retrieved from the interviews:

Player #1: "The guides are what I use the most, including dungeon guides and crafting guides".

Player #2: "I often use game guides, especially since I'm quite new to the game and there's a lot I need to learn".

Player #6: "It helped me put the story in my mind in another form, for example images, and I appreciated that since I really can't draw, even if I wanted".

Player #8: "Whenever I encounter problems in the game, I always find solutions in user-generated content, which makes me play more smoothly and happily".

User-generated content's role in retaining players and attracting new players. Almost all participants recognize the potential user-generated content has to rekindle players' interest, or to attract new players. This is mostly due to user-generated content showcase the game's vibrant community and the endless possibilities within the game world.

Examples retrieved from the interviews:

Player #3: "There was one instance where a guide I wrote for a particularly tough raid helped a player who had been on the verge of quitting due to frustration".

Player #5: "Creating and sharing my own stuff really spices up my gaming. It's like always finding new things to do or see".

Player #9: "Engaging with user-generated content also keeps the game fresh and exciting. It's like there's always something new to discover, whether it's a clever gameplay strategy, a beautifully crafted piece of artwork, or a hilariously edited video".

Player #10: "Maybe it enhances the communication between players, but it's definitely attracted more players like me to the game".

To sum up, all participants have encountered, interacted with, or created a diverse range of user-generated content. Although the content they engage with vary depending on their needs and preferences, all players have positive attitude towards user-generated content, saying that it enriches the game massively. Players exhibit a variety of interaction methods with user-generated content within the Final Fantasy XIV community, for example, they engage with user-generated content by actively participating in forums and social media platforms where they share, discuss, and collaborate on content; they contribute by creating detailed guides, walkthroughs, and tutorial videos that assist other players in navigating the game's content. An example of the community being helpful and friendly would be player #8 using beginner guides created by other players to enhance his understanding and performance, reflecting his engagement primarily through consumption of content that facilitates his gameplay. Additionally, players participate by sharing personalized content such as screenshots, game modifications, or narrative extensions of the game through fan fiction or role-playing, which enrich their personal game experience and that of their peers. They also contribute to the community by creating and sharing visual content like fan art or engaging in cosplay, as noted by, for example, player #9, who creates video guides and cosplays game characters. This not only shows their direct contribution to the user-generated content ecosystem but also highlights their role in fostering a vibrant community through active content creation and sharing. These activities are motivated by specific gratifications found in the results.

Five main motivations were found to be the main drivers for participants to engage with user-generated content, namely: refining playing skills, self-expression and self-identity affirmation through interaction with others, entertainment and relaxation, enhancing the playing experience, and the appreciation for user-generated content's role in showcasing community vibrancy, finding fresh gameplay experiences for themselves as well as attracting new players. These findings align

with existing research, including Triono et al. (2021, p. 27) and Kim (2014, p. 366), which posit user-generated content as a democratically driven social phenomenon facilitating player interactions. Moreover, Yee's (2006) exploration of meaningful social relationships and emotional experiences in virtual environments, Sjöblom and Hamari's (2017) assertion regarding user-generated content's enhancement of gaming experiences (p. 18), and Geng & Chen's (2021) examination of user-generated content's influence on consumer decision-making (p. 9), all resonate with the observed results. Many interviewees also noted the affirmation of personal identity derived from interacting with user-generated content, echoing prior studies on players' internalization of gaming experiences and construction of personal identity (Guegan et al., 2015, p. 349; Shao, 2009, p. 7). These findings validate previous research by Puspitasari et al. (2018) and Chuang (2015) based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory. However, the aspect of escapism, highlighted by Puspitasari et al. (p. 137), as a significant motivation for consistent gameplay, was less prominent in the discussions.

Community influence on user-generated content experiences

This core category contains three themes that probe to answer the second sub-question of this study, namely, "How does the sense of community among Chinese Final Fantasy XIV players shape their experiences and perceptions of user-generated content?". This section looks into the profound influence of community dynamics on the player encounters with user-generated content in Final Fantasy XIV. Results unveil the manner in which community interactions not only shape individual experiences but also foster a communal ambiance that enhances gameplay through user-generated content. Three primary themes emerged from the data: Engagement and connection within the gaming community via user-generated content, community culture and learning, and community's influence on gaming.

Engagement and connection within the gaming community via user-generated content.

Players frequently mentioned about the community serves as an important factor in their engagement with user-generated content, which plays a crucial role in improving community engagement and building deep connections among players. This theme examines how user-generated content assists in starting and maintaining engagement, making social integration more easily, and strengthening community cohesion. Players have unique opportunities through user-generated content to express themselves as individuals while strengthening ties within their community for stronger bonds and increased cohesion with each other.

User-generated content significantly influences players' decisions to start playing games like

Final Fantasy XIV. Many players point to the creativity and vibrancy of the community as a key factor in sparking their initial interest, especially newcomers who consider this aspect important when deciding to join. Once involved in the game, the dynamic nature of user-generated content plays a crucial role in maintaining their engagement. This keeps both new and long-standing members active, as they find common interests through content creation activities that draw them closer to the game's culture and encourage ongoing participation. For example:

Player #4: "Many people are drawn into the game by seeing fan creations, including depictions of different races and fan art, and even screenshots. These elements are quite attractive, including the storylines. For instance, you might come across a comic strip, find it interesting, and then discover it's based on the main storyline of FFXIV, which might then draw you into playing the game".

Player #6: "I was initially drawn to the game because of my friends who were back in China. The pandemic made international traveling near impossible, and this is the way we connect and spend time with each other".

Player #8: "The reason for continuing to play is the social experience and player community in the game... This warm atmosphere makes me feel comfortable and more motivated to continue exploring various aspects of the game".

Social connectivity is a key element of Final Fantasy XIV's gameplay, significantly enhanced by user-generated content. This game's social aspect is deeply intertwined with content created by players, which fosters collaboration and support within the community. Such interactions are particularly vital for newcomers, helping them integrate more smoothly into the community and reducing feelings of exclusion. User-generated content not only facilitates social interactions but also strengthens community bonds by providing platforms for collaboration and personal expression. Through forums, in-game activities, and social media related to their gaming experiences, players exchange strategies, artwork, and narrative ideas, fostering a shared identity among members. These interactions go beyond mere content sharing; they aim to deepen social connections, enhancing players' emotional investment and enriching their overall gaming experience. Examples extracted from the transcripts are:

Player #1: "I also collect funny memes to send to my friends, although I don't have many, haha".

Player #4: "For instance, after I set up some glamours, friends might coordinate outfits with

me to wear a series of matching clothes, and then we all interact together in the game, which is quite enjoyable"; "One reason is because I'm an extrovert—I get my energy from social interactions. Seeing people who like the same things as I do or who share my interests makes me really happy, so I want to post more of what I like and let others who enjoy the same things see it. Actually, after posting on RED (Xiaohongshu), many people have joined me in the game through the platform, and I've also made some new friends".

Player #8: "This kind of community interaction feels great, making me feel [I'm] not only playing games, but also adventuring with a group of like-minded people".

In addition, user-generated content also serves as a powerful tool for players to express their personal identities and earn recognition within the community. Through creating customized content, personalizing characters, and crafting unique stories, players can imprint their individuality onto their gaming experience. The feedback and recognition they receive from the community do more than acknowledge their creativity; these interactions reinforce the game's social bonds and foster an inclusive atmosphere that appreciates diversity and encourages innovation. For example:

Player #1: "I definitely think so. For example, I follow artists and players who share my aesthetic preferences, and the outfits I choose in the game also reflect my taste"; "The way I behave online or certain things I encounter can help shape my personality or reinforce aspects of it. For example, I'm not very outgoing and I'm quite shy when talking to others, but I find many people in the game are like that. Getting to know them online, I've found many who are like me, which makes me feel that this kind of personality is fine too. It lets me meet similar friends, and we all have a great time playing together".

Player #3: "Online, I'm more of a leader and take charge more confidently. This has helped me develop leadership qualities offline as well".

Player #9: "It's like, when I put together a tutorial or share a guide, I'm putting a bit of myself out there. I'm not just helping others—I'm also sharing my take on things, how I solve problems, or how I enjoy the game".

Community culture and learning.

User-generated content plays a crucial role as both an educational resource and a cultural connector within the Final Fantasy XIV community. Participants highlighted that such content

significantly enhances learning, facilitates knowledge sharing, and reflects and shapes community norms and practices. Resources like guides, tutorials, and collaborative projects enable experienced players to educate newcomers and allow for peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, fostering collective problem-solving. Specifically, the creation of guides and tutorials has a profound impact, helping new players grasp complex game mechanics and enhancing the strategies of more seasoned players. When veterans share their expertise, they contribute to a supportive culture of knowledge sharing that strengthens the community. This not only assists newcomers in navigating the game more effectively but also fosters a sense of generosity and communal spirit among contributors. For example:

Player #4: "Crafting these guides involves a lot of playtesting and collaboration with other top players to refine strategies that can benefit the whole community".

Player #9: "I started making these picture-format tutorials for my sprouts, because I'm busy with work sometimes, so I won't be able to respond to their questions in time, so I thought 'why not upload them online so they can directly go to my page and look up for stuff?' That's how I started uploading these tutorials. Some of my sprouts didn't last for long, some went afk, and some stayed and we still play together. I feel very satisfied to see my work helping other people, every time when a new expansion is released I will definitely go explore the new stuff and try to come up with a detailed tutorial".

User-generated content also plays a huge role in shaping cultural practices and norms in communities, acting both as an indicator of community values as well as shaping them over time. Common practices like producing and sharing user-generated content that promotes teamwork can strengthen norms about working together and supporting each other. Culture can impact how players speak and interact in-game, changing everything from how they communicate to how they resolve conflicts. Furthermore, user-generated content provides insight not just into game mechanics but also into a community's deeper norms and expectations. User-generated content serves as an effective practical learning tool that goes beyond simply playing the game; it addresses social etiquette and cultural traditions which form part of its world. Particularly for newer players, user-generated content that outlines unspoken 'rules' of communities is invaluable in helping them adapt more quickly to the gaming environment. For example:

Player #1: "It's hard to pin down because it's a symbiotic relationship... customizing appearances could become a significant part of our community culture".

Player #2: "I think it does. For example, in a QQ group made up of game players, everyone tends to share screenshots or other things they've created to express themselves and communicate".

Player #9: "I think it's the sharing and collaboration that were most prominent for the culture dynamics".

Player #10: "I think the content is very diverse and inclusive, no matter what you like or who you like, there's a spot for you in the community. And I suppose it brings people closer to each other, not only as people who play the same game, but there's a chance you meet people who share the same interests and you can become really close to each other".

Additionally, user-generated content often brings personal satisfaction to those who contribute. Helping others, sharing knowledge, and adding to the community's artistic and cultural life gives content creators a sense of purpose and accomplishment. This satisfaction is very motivating and encourages them to keep participating in user-generated content activities, making the community more lively and strong. For example, Player #3 and #9 see mentorship as their main game style, thus gets fulfillment and satisfaction from guiding newplayers, which brings her fresh experience and feel more connected to the gaming community. *Player #3: "I see myself taking on more of a mentorship role, especially as newer and more complex content is released"; Player #9: "As a Crown Mentor, I get a lot of fulfillment from guiding new players".*

Community's influence on gaming. In Final Fantasy XIV, the impact of the community on the game experience goes far beyond the game itself. This theme explores not only how the community affects what happens in the game, but also how the community changes players' broader gaming habits and lifestyles. By engaging with user-generated content and interacting within the community, players develop long-term strategies to stay engaged, prioritize social interactions, and change their gaming behaviors based on community norms and values. Story content and social interactions are an important part of the community experience, and they have had a large impact on long-term engagement in Final Fantasy XIV. Players often say that community-driven narratives and cooperative gaming experiences are the main reasons they stick with the game over time. These aspects keep games exciting and fresh, giving players new challenges and stories to explore together. Playing with friends and focusing on social interactions is an important part of the community-influenced gaming experience. Many players schedule their playtime based on their friends' schedules, illustrating how strong community ties can influence the way they play. This focus on social interaction not only makes the game more fun, it also brings players deeper into the community, creating a cycle that keeps them coming back. For example:

Player #1: "Taking photos with friends, including my boyfriend, is also very special to me. It's a cherished part of my memories and an important aspect of my life".

Player #4: "And through the game, I've also met many close friends, not only playing this game but also getting along well in our daily chats".

Player #5: "But yeah, the night time is when the real fun happens—whether it's tackling challenges with friends or capturing footage for my next creative project".

Player #7: "What keeps me playing are the character designs, the world view, the storylines, and the relatively good game atmosphere. I have also made many friends in the game".

The community also affects gaming through the planning of both online and offline events, which often lead to more active online participation. For example, meeting up in person can strengthen relationships that lead to more united and committed online play. Community strategies to keep players involved, like setting up events for the whole server or user-generated content contests, also play a key role in determining how players interact with the game and each other. The way players adjust their gaming routines and strategies to meet community expectations and take advantage of opportunities also shows the community's impact. For instance, players may take roles in guilds or join in community-led projects that make them change how they usually play. These changes are not just proof of the community's influence but also show how it helps create a dynamic and adaptable gaming environment. Examples are:

Player #3: "Participating in events like FanFest and visiting places like the Eorzea Café enrich my understanding of the game's culture and allow me to meet with fellow players in real life".

Player #4: "Priority... if someone calls out, then I go to battlegrounds; otherwise, I work on my glamour".;

"Originally, [me and my university's gaming club members] didn't play together much, just knew of each other. But because we all played Final Fantasy XIV, we grew closer over time. We've created things like screenshots and drawings of our characters, and even made merchandise to exchange as gifts among friends at school. Another is attending anime conventions like FFOnly with local friends, where we admire the props they make. For example, when a warrior player sees a beautifully made giant axe, everyone crowds around, eager to touch it".

Player #6: "The only way I can think of community needs influencing my decision to engage is when the raiding community decides they want to do this specific strat in a fight".

Player #9: "I also go to comic cons offline and cosplay characters as NPCs or my OC and I would upload the photos online. It's a fun way to connect with other fans and celebrate our favorite aspects of the game together".

In summary, three themes are discovered in order to reveal the communal aspects of players' engagement with user-generated content, indicating the significant role of community in shaping the experiences and perceptions of user-generated content among Chinese Final Fantasy XIV players. The results show that user-generated content serves as an important tool for social integration and strengthening community cohesion, which is inline with Sjöblom and Hamari's (2017) research result of user-generated content creating a sense of belonging and social connections within the gaming community (p. 18). Players value user-generated content for the opportunities it provides to express their identities and confirm their roles within the community, as the previous research of Jin et al. (2017, p. 412) indicates, social interactions play a crucial role in shaping players' identity within MMORPGs; and Allein et al. (2021, introduction section, para. 2)'s statement that user-generated content helps shape and preserve players' online social identities within the gaming communities. Findings on players expressing their identities within the community validates the Social Identity Approach proposed by Postmes & Branscombe (2010) and further research by Brown (2000), that through self-identification and interaction with others, one gains their social identity as a player belonging in a certain community (p. 761). This leads to stronger social connections and a more unified community spirit. Many players mentioned that the creativity and energy of the community's user-generated content were key reasons they decided to join Final Fantasy XIV. Their continued involvement is supported by the active and engaging nature of user-generated content, which keeps the community lively. Players find common interests through shared content creation activities, which introduce them to the community's culture and help keep them engaged over time, which is in line with Chuang's (2020) research on the shared social identity, and Pieteresen et al. (2019)'s finding of players collaborate in content creation, share experiences, and work together, to nurture a sense of community and shared identity (p. 134). Besides, user-generated content supports community-based learning and shares knowledge, which is particularly beneficial for new players. Veteran players often create guides and tutorials as forms of user-generated content, which demystify complex game mechanics and improve the gaming strategies of newer players. This culture of support and knowledge sharing is crucial for sustaining the community's strength. The community also influence players' gaming habits and routines. Community-organized online and offline events enhances players' engagement and encourage them to adapt their gaming behaviors to align with community norms and values.

Other/ Cross-cutting themes

Due to the conceptualization approach taken and designed in this study, the first two core categories were used to attempt to directly answer the two sub-questions of the research. Therefore, other themes were categorized under core category 3 - Other/ Cross-cutting themes. These diverse themes do not exclusively fit into the primary categories, but to some extent can serve as explanations and additions to the research question and sub questions. These themes include barriers and challenges in user-generated content creation, players' aspirations, the initial attraction to the game, and the influence of gaming habits shaped by community interactions. Each theme provides additional insights into how broader social and personal factors influence players' experiences with user-generated content.

Barriers and challenges in user-generated content creation. Players sometimes face various obstacles that make it difficult for them to create or engage with user-generated content. These include technical problems, lack of resources and the required skills, policy barriers, and social challenges. For example, Player #6 noticed the social anxiety as a barrier for him to engage with community and the shared content within the community: *"I think the biggest barrier is social anxiety or being scared by the idea of engaging with people. There's also some big XIV Twitter accounts that, if you really want to be part of the community, you have to know about them, but if you don't care, sure"*. Player #8 shared that he wasn't able to create content due to the lack of technical knowledge such as video editing and screenshot processing, Player #10 worried that he runs out of inspiration or motivation at times, and Player #9 faced the challenge of time commitment: *"One of the main challenges is the time commitment required to create high-quality content that is both informative and engaging"*.

Aspirations. Many participants have specific hopes and desires related to user-generated content in Final Fantasy XIV, such as more enriched and compiled content: *"I think the future will see more of these integrated platforms or apps that make it easier for users to search and compile content. Even wikis are likely to improve in terms of interface and search capabilities to make information more accessible"*; call for more official support for user-generated content: *Player #8: "I hope to see more official support for user-generated content, such as providing more creative tools and platforms, as well as organizing more related activities and competitions"*; enhancements to the game's design that could allow more freedom for user-generated content: *Player #4: "I hope they can provide more slots for glamour presets to allow players more space to save their outfits"*. Player #4 also mentioned that she would like to see an integrated 'blacklist' system listing the notorious players in order to improve the level of security.

Initial attraction. Despite being attracted to this game due to social connectedness, other elements drawing players initially to Final Fantasy XIV are, for example, specific game mechanics and content, narrative and design, visual and auditory, and the creative, rich user-generated content scene of fan art. To quote some of the conversations:

Player #3: *"I was initially drawn to the game by its rich narrative and the complexity of its mechanics"*.

Player #2: *"What fascinates me about this game is that it has a market trade, which is a system where you can trade goods, and a map to explore for treasure"*.

Player #10: *"I was initially attracted to this game by the fan art and other player-generated content I saw on Weibo"*.

Gaming habits and routines. Participants have mentioned their regular daily routine, and their preferred content in game. It is notable that when describing their playing habits and routines, many of the participants would mention their penchant for in-game socialization, such as Player #6 describing his typical gaming session: *"For now the gaming session consists solely of high-end raiding. Aside from raiding with a static, I'm a combat-focused player, so I'd do the roulettes in game as well as some PF parties. I enjoy the time spent raiding with my friends more than anything else; otherwise, I also enjoy helping people when I can"*; Player#3 also describes the social aspect that kept him playing: *"Over the years, what keeps me engaged is the community and the continuous challenge presented by high-level content"*. There are also participants who describe creating content as very important to daily gameplay, such as Player #7, who often shares videos and outfits she makes for her character on RED, says, *"I prioritize daily roulettes, but my favorite activity is glamour dressing. I consider myself an ultimate casual player"*. And Player #5's consistent efforts on making in-game videos: *"During the day, if I have some free time, I might log in to check on things or set up for whatever video I'm planning to shoot"*.

Important information obtained from the themes in this category provide valuable additions to the answers to the research question and sub-questions. Firstly, while many participants gave positive feedback about user-generated content, several factors like knowledge of technology, access to resources, mastery of skills, and the limitation of game policies, were mentioned as obstacles that limit players' engagement with user-generated content, particularly in creating it. For example, some players expressed difficulties due to lack of proper tools or because the game's policies restrict certain types of user-generated content, from which participants derive the aspiration to see more advanced tools integrated directly into the game, which could evolve alongside the game's updates, to enhance the richness of the content created by players. Themes from this category also reveal that participants were drawn to Final Fantasy XIV for a variety of

reasons. Interestingly, while some were introduced to the game by friends or acquaintances, some were attracted by the user-generated content they encountered even before they started playing. This diversity in initial attraction confirms the important role of social connections and the player community in the game, as well as the potential of user-generated content to attract new players, indicating that user-generated content not only retains existing players but also pulls in new one by showcasing the vibrant community and creative opportunities within the game. Furthermore, many participants emphasized that social interactions and content creation within the game are priorities in their daily gaming routines, showing the importance of these aspects in enriching their overall gaming experience. By engaging in socialization and creating user-generated content, players find deeper satisfaction and a more rewarding connection to the community, which keeps them involved and enthusiastic about the game.

Conclusion

Based on a detailed thematic analysis of interviews with ten active Chinese players of Final Fantasy XIV, this research delves into the experiences, perceptions, and motivations of these players concerning user-generated content within the game. This study examines how user-generated content influences player interactions and shapes the dynamics of the community. The findings reveal the complex role that user-generated content plays in enhancing the gaming environment, highlighting its significant impact on both individual and community levels. These insights from the analysis sufficiently address the central research question and the associated sub-questions, showcasing the profound implications of user-generated content for online gaming communities at large. Furthermore, this investigation enriches our understanding of the interaction between players and user-generated content, offering valuable perspectives for game developers and community managers aiming to cultivate engaging and vibrant gaming environments.

Answers to the research question and sub-questions

First, I would like to start by answering two sub-questions in order to combine and integrate them to fully answer the main question. The answer to each of the sub-question is in accordance to, and derived from the core categories 1, player engagement and motivations for user-generated content, and 2, community influence on user-generated content experiences. Category 3 contains themes that are used for explanatory and supplement functions to answering the questions.

Sub-question 1: In what ways do Chinese Final Fantasy XIV players engage with, participate in, or contribute to user-generated content, and what motivates their involvement?

According to the findings, it is evident from the findings that Chinese players interact with user-generated content through both consuming and producing it. Players engage with, participate in, and contribute to various types of user-generated content, including game guides and walkthroughs, screenshots and glamour sharing, mods, fan art and cosplay, game music videos and creative videos, character stories and role-playing, interactive and collaborative projects, and social media posts/ interactions, which they utilize to enhance their gaming experience so as to assist others. Moreover, many players are motivated to create and share user-generated content by the desire to support newcomers, enrich and give back to the community, and express personal creativity. The main motivations found behind players' involvement in engagement, participation and contribution are:

1. To gain mastery and skill advancement. Many Players may use user-generated content such as guides and walkthroughs created by other players to hone game strategies and enhance gaming abilities. For newcomers hoping to navigate Final Fantasy XIV more efficiently, this type of engagement may serve as the perfect first step.

2. Creative expression and identity affirmation. User-generated content becomes a medium for personal expression through character customization, fan art and narrative expansion. Players take pride in forging unique identities in games, which are celebrated and shared in the community. This type of expression is especially cherished because it allows players to leave a personal mark on the game world.

3. Social Interaction and Community Building. Players can participate in creating content that promotes interaction, such as organizing in-game events or engaging in collaborative community projects, to enhance their individual gameplay while fostering a vibrant, supportive community. Engaging in user-generated content creates bonds and helps maintain an active community, which is crucial for the game's longevity as it helps to retain original players as well as attract new players.

4. Contribution and reciprocity. Experienced players often feel a sense of responsibility to give back to the community that supported their initial growth. By creating user-generated content, they contribute to a cycle of knowledge sharing and support that sustains the community's ongoing development.

5. Enjoyment and stress-relieving. Many players derive pleasure and a sense of belonging by interacting with or creating humorous or witty content, as well as to release stress from their daily lives, and by sharing this content with friends in the community to foster friendships and common threads.

To sum up briefly, Chinese players of Final Fantasy XIV actively engage with user-generated content through both consumption and production, driven by desires to improve gameplay experience, support newcomers, express creativity, build communities, and find enjoyment and relaxation. Results also highlights that the motivations for engaging with user-generated content include seeking knowledge, enhancing personal gaming skills, and relieving stress. Such engagement is not only driven by individual interests but is also heavily influenced by the communal culture that encourages sharing, collaboration, and mutual support.

Sub-question 2: How does the sense of community among Chinese Final Fantasy XIV players shape their experiences and perceptions of user-generated content?

A sense of community is critical in shaping players' experience and perception of user-generated content, creating an environment where user-generated content is highly appreciated and expected. Community norms that promote sharing, collaboration, and mutual support contribute to the quality and impact of user-generated content. Through players' interactions with user-generated content, their sense of belonging and active participation in the community is strengthened, which in turn increases their engagement with the game.

The community is a nurturing environment where user-generated content is both appreciated and criticized, thus creating space for continuous improvement and innovation. The way the community responds to user-generated content - through feedback, collaboration, and shared experiences - creates stronger social bonds and improves cohesion within the community. Players feel more connected to each other when they share content that reflects common experiences and challenges in the game. This sense of community is further strengthened through user-generated content to solve problems and celebrate achievements together. Furthermore, the community's response to user-generated content reinforces players' sense of belonging and identity within the game, enhancing their commitment to the virtual worlds. For players who create content on their own, receiving positive feedback help them build confidence and further assure of their abilities or skills, motivating them to create more innovative content.

Main research question: What are the experiences and perceptions of Chinese Final Fantasy XIV players regarding user-generated content?

In combination of the all the retrieved findings and the answers to the sub-questions, it can be concluded that, user-generated content is integral to enhancing the gameplay experiences for Chinese players of Final Fantasy XIV, who engage with various types of user-generated content through both consumption and production. user-generated content is seen as a crucial tool/medium

enriching both their individual and communal engagements. Players perceive user-generated content as a crucial element that extends beyond mere game enhancement to become a substantial part of their social interaction and creative expression within the game's universe. user-generated content allows players to customize their experience, offering a creative outlet and a means to influence the game environment and community culture significantly. The study highlights that the motivations for engaging with user-generated content include seeking knowledge, enhancing personal gaming skills, expressing creativity and affirming identity, and enjoyment.

Players appreciate user-generated content because it provides opportunities for continuous learning and improvement in the game. Player interactions with user-generated content are not only driven by personal interests, but are also heavily influenced by a community culture that encourages sharing, collaboration, and support. User-generated content (e.g., tutorials, strategy guides, and forums) is essential as it aids new players to understand complex game mechanics and integrate more smoothly into the community. For veteran players, user-generated content provides a platform to share and showcase their expertise, express creativity, and construct their identity and status within the gaming community. This exchange not only improves individual gameplay, but also creates a supportive community atmosphere that makes the game more appealing to everyone.

In summary, interactions with user-generated content among Chinese players of Final Fantasy XIV are closely intertwined with the social fabric of the game and the personal experiences of the players. This content enhances personal mastery, encourages creative expression, enables meaningful social interactions, and strengthens community bonds. These findings offer thorough responses to research questions concerning the diverse roles of user-generated content in enhancing both individual and communal gaming experiences. The community plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and usage of user-generated content, as well as in creating engaging and dynamic gaming environments.

Critical analysis of the study

This study used a qualitative methodology comprising semi-structured qualitative interviews and Naeem et al.'s (2023) thematic analysis approach, to gain in-depth insights into the complex phenomenon of player engagement with user-generated content within the Chinese Final Fantasy XIV community. Through using thematic analysis, this research successfully identified and interpreted various dimensions of player interaction with user-generated content that illuminate its multifaceted nature. The findings not only reinforce but also expand the application of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Identity Theory to the context of massively multiplayer online role-playing games like Final Fantasy XIV. Applying the Uses and Gratifications Theory helps to

understand the reasons why players engage in user-generated content, the findings suggest that the motivations behind players' engagement with user-generated content include knowledge sharing, entertainment, and knowledge sharing, which are common reasons found in earlier studies by Chuang (2015) and Puspitasari et al. (2018). These motivations coincide with the reasons players choose specific media - to fulfill specific psychological or social needs - as predicted by the Uses and Gratifications Theory. For instance, the active and common engagement between players and contents such as strategy guides and fan discussions supports the notion of "knowledge sharing" as a significant gratification sought by players, as well as a positive outcome of the action of engaging with user-generated content, echoing earlier findings in Chuang (2015, p. 74). In addition to existing findings about players' social and psychological needs in the game world, the study points to how user-generated content serves as a medium which helps players demonstrate their identity and gain social recognition, thereby increasing their sense of pleasure in the game. This suggests that the interaction between gratification is more complex than previous research has typically addressed, suggesting that the theory could include the role of digital identity and community status in online gaming culture.

Furthermore, user-generated content greatly contributes to building a sense of belonging and shared identity among players (Wilson, 2015; Chuang, 2020; O'Conner et al.) This study deepens our understanding of virtual communities by demonstrating how certain user-generated content (e.g., group projects or shared content) strengthens community ties and makes players more invested in the community social identity in virtual communities. This not only supports existing theories of social identity, that players establish connections and social norms that form a shared/collective identity that centers around their gaming experience (Chuang, 2020, p. 1; Brown, 2000, p. 761; Willson, 2015, p. 15), but also shows its wider use by linking these stories to real-life activities within MMO communities. This study therefore validates and extends existing theories by showing how digital spaces can enrich the way we apply traditional media theories. By linking Uses and Gratifications theory and Social Identity theory to real data from the world of MMORPGs, this study deepens the understanding of how modern online gaming platforms influence user behavior and community dynamics, as well as the enormous potential that online gaming-centered player communities may hold to influence consumer decisions, playing styles, and social concentration. The study also suggests that theories like the Uses and Gratifications theory and the concept of social identity need to be interpreted and extended flexibly to accommodate the ever-changing ways in which people interact in digital spaces, especially in today's highly digitized society, and also considering the future development of new gaming and interactive technologies, it is possible that people will rely more on the social activities of online communities and be provided with richer ways

of interacting with them, and that they may show a completely different side of themselves online than they do in reality, as was the case with some of the interviewees of this study. It would then be an interesting and important research topic to understand how they derive gratifications from such interactive behaviors and how they construct their self-identity and what influences the process of identity construction.

By deeply investigating players' insights, this research has practical implications for game developers, community managers, and players themselves. For game developers, understanding the factors that drive engagement with user-generated content can inform the design of game features that support and enhance user creativity and community building, with the affirmation that high-quality user-generated content has the potential to attract new players as well as to retain original players. Community managers can use these insights to foster environments that encourage positive interactions and support player-led initiatives, offering players more space and freedom to create and interact. The study also implicates further research. Future studies could explore the impact of user-generated content in other online gaming communities and compare these dynamics across different cultural contexts, which would enhance the understanding of global digital cultures and could guide more culturally aware game design. It would be also interesting to explore how different gaming platforms influence player engagement with user-generated content. Another valuable direction would be longitudinal research on how player engagement with user-generated content evolves over time, which could track changes in player motivations and community interactions as games develop and communities grow, helping to identify trends in player retention and community health.

Limitations

While providing valuable insights into the engagement with user-generated content among Chinese players of Final Fantasy XIV, this study has several limitations that should be considered. The research was conducted with a relatively small sample size of ten players, which, while sufficient for an exploratory qualitative analysis, may not capture the full diversity of experiences and opinions that exist within the broader population of Chinese Final Fantasy XIV players. The use of semi-structured interviews, although effective in gaining deep insights, relies heavily on the participants' willingness and ability to articulate their thoughts, which might introduce a form of response bias. Participants may have presented themselves in a manner they perceive as favorable, which could influence the authenticity of the data. Besides, although claiming that the participants were mainly recruited from three social media platforms and snowballing process, there was only one participant recruited from TikTok, which could result in insufficient representation. This leads to another

possible limitation that all respondents were recruited from social media, which may indicate that they are more or less active on social media and are more likely to be more reliant on social media and the internet for game related information, therefore, the sample of respondents does not include players who do not interact with social media and there is no way to know their user-generated content perceptions and their experiences.

Besides, the study focuses exclusively on one game within the MMORPG genre, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other online games with different mechanics and community dynamics. Another consideration is the dynamic nature of online gaming communities; as the game and its community continue to evolve, the findings might not fully reflect future changes in player behaviors and attitudes towards user-generated content. These limitations suggest that while the study offers important initial insights, its findings should be interpreted with caution, and there is a substantial need for further research to confirm and expand upon these observations. Another limitation is the limited theoretical framework. While the study uses established frameworks such as Uses and Gratifications Theory and concepts of social identity, other potentially relevant theories such as Media Richness Theory or Technology Acceptance Model might provide additional insights but are not explored. This could result in the limitation knowledge which assist in recognizing, developing and categorizing themes.

Last but not least, a notable limitation is the language and cultural interpretation. Since the study involves Chinese players, there could be nuances in how user-generated content is perceived and utilized due to the cultural differences that may not be fully captured or understood. Additionally, translation and interpretation errors could potentially skew the data or the analysis.

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APPENDICIES

Appendix A: Information and consent form



Information and consent form

FFXIV UGC Study Participation Consent

Introduction

Dear participant,

I am Luying Wan and I am a master student majoring Media & Creative Industries at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I am conducting research on the experiences and perceptions of Chinese players regarding user-generated content (UGC) in Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV). I am conducting this research independently: the financial contribution has no influence on the outcomes of this study.

I will explain the study below. If you have any questions, please ask me. While reading, you can mark parts of the text that are unclear to you.

If you want to participate in the study, you can indicate this at the end of this form.

What is the research about?

This study aims to understand how Chinese players of the online game Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV) use and think about content that they or other players create, like videos, artwork, and game guides. I want to explore what motivates players to engage with and/or create this content, how it affects their gaming experience, and how it contributes to the community within the game. The goal is to learn more about the role this user-created content plays in enriching the game for everyone involved.

Why am I asking you to participate?

I am inviting you to participate in this study because you are an active player of FFXIV and a member of the Chinese gaming community. Your experiences and interactions with UGC make you a valuable contributor to the understanding of how this content influences player experiences and community dynamics within the game. Your insights are essential in helping to understand the broader implications of UGC in enhancing the gaming environment.

What can you expect?

In this study, you will participate in a semi-structured interview that will take approximately 45-60 minutes of your time. The interview will be conducted online via a video call platform at a time that is convenient for you, ensuring minimal disruption to your daily schedule. During the interview, we will discuss topics related to your experience with UGC in FFXIV. We will explore questions like, "Can you describe a piece of content you created or interacted with recently and what it meant to you and your gameplay?".

The purpose of these discussions is to gather insights into how players like you perceive and interact with user-generated content, and how this content influences the social and gaming dynamics within the FFXIV community. You will not need to prepare anything in advance, and there are no right or wrong answers in this interview. We are interested in hearing about your personal experiences and viewpoints.

You decide whether to participate

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can stop at any time and would not need to provide any explanation.

What are the potential risks and discomforts?

Privacy concerns: One potential risk involves the discussion of your personal experiences within the gaming community, which may include sharing details that you consider private. Although the content of the interviews will focus on your interactions with user-generated content in Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV), you might inadvertently disclose personal information. To mitigate privacy concerns, all interviews will be conducted in a confidential manner. Your identity will not be disclosed in any reports or publications that result from this research. All digital recordings and transcripts will be securely stored, accessible only to the researcher, and will be destroyed after the study concludes.

Emotional discomfort: Discussing experiences related to gaming, especially if they involve intense or negative interactions, could potentially lead to discomfort or distress. You are free to choose how much you



wish to disclose during the interviews. Should discussing your experiences lead to discomfort, you will have the option to pause or stop the interview at any time without penalty.

What do you get for participating?

After the interview, you will be offered a compensation equivalent to 10 euros. You can choose to receive this compensation either as cash or as an in-game gift voucher for FFXIV, depending on your preference.

What data will I ask you to provide?

In this study, I will collect basic personal information such as your name and email address to facilitate communication and manage participation. I will also gather demographic details like age and gender for sample presentation. During the interview, I will ask you about your sentiments/feelings/opinions and experiences with UGC and the online gaming community. Throughout our interview, which will be audio-recorded for accuracy, you may inadvertently disclose sensitive information. To ensure your privacy, all personal data will be handled with the highest confidentiality. Audio recordings will be used solely for transcription and then deleted to safeguard your privacy. Participants will be informed about their rights, including how to withdraw from the study at any time and how their data will be managed if they choose to withdraw.

I need your bank account number/ game account name/ any preferred alternative payment method, to send the compensation.

I also need your email address, to send the results of the study to you.

Who can see your data? / What will happen to my data?

Your privacy is of utmost importance to me. All personal data collected during this study, including your name, contact details, bank account or game account information, and any data generated during the interviews, will be treated with confidentiality. Only persons involved in the research can see your data, which will be used solely for the purposes of this study.

Recordings are transcribed and translated into English. Your name will be replaced with a number. Your direct personal data will be stored separately from your answers and the transcription. I may use your specific answers in the article. If your answer can be traced to you or I would like to mention your name, I will ask your permission first.

How long will your personal data be stored?

In accordance with the EUR Research Data Management Policy, all research data from this study, including unpublished materials and software codes, your data will be retained for 10 years after completion of the research. I retain the data so that other researchers have the opportunity to verify that the research was conducted correctly. Personal contact details and other non-essential data that do not contribute to the integrity of the research will be deleted immediately after the study concludes to protect participant privacy. Audio and visual recordings will be transcribed and then deleted once accuracy is confirmed.

Using your data for new research

Part of the data collected may be useful for educational purposes and future research, including in very different research areas. In the consent form I ask you to give us permission to use your personal data, excluding name, email address, payment methods, recordings or any other direct personal information that is identifiable, for follow-up or other scientific research. The data shared are pseudonymized.

What happens with the results of the study?

The findings of this study will be compiled and discussed in detail in my master's thesis, which will be submitted to Erasmus University Rotterdam. After the thesis is completed, I will provide a summary of the results to all participants who are interested in seeing the outcomes of the research. This summary will be available within three months after the thesis submission, allowing participants to understand how their contributions were utilized and the conclusions drawn from the study. You may indicate if you would like to receive the results.



While the comprehensive results will not be published in academic journals or presented at conferences, they will contribute to the academic achievements required for the completion of my master's degree and will be available through the university's library system. This ensures that the research remains accessible to other students and academics who might benefit from the insights gathered during this study.

Do you have questions about the study?

If you have any questions about the study or your privacy rights, such as accessing, changing, deleting, or updating your data, please contact me.

Name: Luying Wan
Email: lw654459@eur.nl

Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email the Data Protection Officer (fg@eur.nl) or visit www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl. (T: 088 - 1805250)

Do you regret your participation?

During or after the study, you may regret your participation. Please indicate this by contacting me. Deleting your data is no longer possible if the data has been anonymized, making it impossible to trace which data came from you. Anonymizing the data is done within one week after the data was collected.

Declaration of Consent

I have read the information letter. I understand what the study is about and what data will be collected from me. I was able to ask questions as well. My questions were adequately answered.

By signing this form, I:

1. consent to participate in this research;
2. consent to the use of my personal data
3. confirm that I am at least 18 years old;
4. confirm that I understand that participating in this research is completely voluntary and that I can stop at any time;
5. confirm that I understand that my data will be anonymised for publication, educational purposes and further research;

Check the boxes below if you consent to this.

Audio recording

I consent to [the interview] being audio recorded.

My answers in the article

I give permission for my answers to be used in papers, such as an article in a journal or book. My name will not be included.

Use for educational purposes and further research

I hereby consent to having my personal data, namely the anonymized transcribed interview, stored and used for educational purposes and for future research, also in other areas of research than this research.

New research

I give permission to be contacted again for new research.

Name of participant:

Participant's signature:

Date:

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Introduction and Warm-up Questions

- Can you tell me a bit about your yourself and how long you've been playing FFXIV?
- What initially attracted you to play FFXIV, and what keeps you playing?

General Gaming Habits

- How often do you play FFXIV, and during which parts of the day are you most active?
- Can you describe a typical gaming session? What activities do you prioritize during your gaming sessions and why?

Understanding and Involvement in user-generated content

Give the participant a definition to user-generated content in the gaming context: user-generated content, in the gaming context, refers to content created and shared by members within the gaming community. This content can include a wide range of materials such as gameplay videos, reviews, forum and social media posts, in-game creations, modifications, tools, and social media interactions related to gaming experiences (Duan et al., 2022, p. 2; McKenzie et al., 2012, overview section, para. 1).

- Can you list some types of user-generated content that you usually encounter or engage with?
- What kind of user-generated content have you personally created or contributed to, if any?

Motivations for Engaging with user-generated content

- Why do you like making or using things that players have created for FFXIV?
- Have any particular experiences or community needs influenced your decision to engage with user-generated content?
- How does creating or interacting with user-generated content enhance your gaming experience?

Identity and user-generated content

- Do you think creating or interacting with FFXIV's user-generated content helps you express your identity?
- (If so) how does it help you shape or reflect your identity online?

Perceptions and Value of user-generated content

- In your opinion, how important is user-generated content to the FFXIV community?
- What value do you think user-generated content adds to the game for you and for other players?
- Can you share a memorable experience related to user-generated content that significantly impacted your gameplay?

Community Dynamics and user-generated content

- Do you know any notable community events or collaborations that revolve around user-generated content?
- How do you feel user-generated content influences the dynamics or the culture within the FFXIV community?
- Do you participate in any groups or forums where user-generated content is discussed or shared? If so, what has your experience been like?
- Can you share how being part of this game's community has influenced how you see yourself?
- Do you think that, for a certain degree, the game's community has influenced your interaction with user-generated content?

Challenges and Barriers

- Have you faced any challenges when creating, sharing, or using user-generated content in FFXIV?
- Are there any barriers or limitations that you think affect how people engage with user-generated content in the game?
- Do you think there are any challenges, for you or other players, to access to the gaming community?

Future Perspectives

- How do you see the role of user-generated content evolving in FFXIV in the future?
- Are there any changes or improvements you would like to see regarding how user-generated content is handled within the game or the community?

Closing

- Is there anything else about your experience with user-generated content in FFXIV, or your identity related to FFXIV, that you would like to share that we haven't covered yet?
- Do you have any questions for me, or is there anything you'd like to discuss further?

Appendix C: Interview participants' information

Name (Anonymized)	Gender	Age	Length of gameplay	Recruitment channel	Length of interview (minutes)
Player #1	Female	23	2-3 months	Weibo	51
Player #2	Male	28	2-3 months	Snowballing	47
Player #3	Male	Did not disclose	3 years	Weibo	43
Player #4	Female	23	9 months	RED	46
Player #5	Female	Did not disclose	2 years	TikTok	50
Player #6	Male	Did not disclose	3 years and a half	Snowballing	45
Player #7	Female	25	4 years and a half	RED	53
Player #8	Male	35	1 month	Snowballing	49
Player #9	Female	30	5 years	Weibo	51
Player #10	Female	23	6 months	RED	46

Appendix D: Coding tree

Advanced mastery and sharing of game strategies	Mastery and skill advancement through user-generated content.	Player Engagement and Motivation for user-generated content
Aspirations to contribute to user-generated content as skills and knowledge grow		
Using user-generated content to improve gameplay efficiency and effectiveness		
Using user-generated content to overcome game challenges and enhance game understanding		
Expressing personal identity and creativity through community interaction	Creative expression and identity affirmation via user-generated content	
Creative passion and skill application		
Creative expression and personal storytelling		
Emotional expression and identity affirmation		
user-generated content creation driven by personal interest and professional alignment		
user-generated content helps express personal identity and style within the community		
Using user-generated content for personalization and expressing personal identity within the game		
Enhancement of confidence and social skills through community participation		
Positive community feedback enhances self-esteem		
Emotional and social fulfillment derived from user-generated content interactions		
user-generated content creation as a stress relief mechanism	Interacting with user-generated content for enjoyment and relieving	
Derive fun and enjoyment from user-		

generated content	stress	
Game understanding and community belonging	user-generated content's role in enhancing gaming experience	
Adding narrative		
Operational ease		
Improve efficiency		
Overcome challenges		
Creating content for personal enjoyment		
Frequent reliance on and utilization of player-generated guides for learning and efficiency		
user-generated content enriches emotional connection to game characters		
Retaining players and rekindling their interest in the game	user-generated content's role in enhancing player retention and attracting new players	
Maintaining game appeal		
Sustaining game interest and community vibrancy		
user-generated content enhances attachment to the game beyond official content		
Influence of the gaming community on initial game choice and ongoing engagement	Engagement and connection within the game community via user-generated content	Community Influence on user-generated content Experiences
Initial engagement driven by social connectivity		
Social integration facilitated by engaging with user-generated content		
Use of user-generated content to enhance social interactions and community bonding		
user-generated content's role in enhancing social bonds and community cohesion		
user-generated content as a medium for		

expressing and validating player identity within the community		
Creation of guides as a form of community support and knowledge sharing	Community culture and learning	
Impact of user-generated content on community cultural practices and norms		
Leveraging community support and user-generated content for learning and problem-solving		
user-generated content as a practical learning tool for new players		
user-generated content facilitates learning about game mechanics and community norms		
user-generated content's role in shaping and reflecting community culture		
Personal satisfaction through helping others		
user-generated content as essential for fostering a vibrant and supportive community		
Memorable experiences facilitated by community-created user-generated content events		
Participation in innovative community projects		
Contribution to the game's artistic community		
user-generated content fosters inclusivity and close relationships		
Long-term engagement fueled by narrative and community	Community's influence on gaming	
Play with friends in game		
Prioritize social interactions in game		
Influence of offline community events on online engagement		

Community strategies shaping personal user-generated content usage		
Long-term impact of user-generated content on game engagement		
Challenges new players face in creating user-generated content due to lack of skills and resources	Barriers and challenges	Other/ Cross-cutting themes
Technical and motivational challenges in user-generated content creation		
Technical and policy barriers to user-generated content creation		
Technical and social challenges faced by players in creating and sharing user-generated content		
Future aspirations for more official support for user-generated content	Aspirations	
Future aspirations for their role in the community and potential changes in user-generated content		
Attraction to and engagement with specific game mechanics and content	Initial attraction	
Attraction to game based on narrative and design		
Attraction to game based on visual and auditory		
Initial engagement driven by social connectivity		
Initial attraction through fan art		
Regular gaming routine	Gaming habits and routines	
Transition to casual gameplay		
Mentorship as a player role		
Preference for content creation and casual gaming activities		
Continued game play		
Engagement through creativity and content creation		

Gameplay as a medium for personal development		
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