

The role of young women in gaming subculture

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Throughout the time frame of youth, between the ages of 12 and 25, individuals may experience one or multiple identities in different subcultures. The role of young women within the gaming subculture will be discussed in terms of a neo-tribe within the subculture of online gaming by analyses of previous studies and post-subcultural theory. Youth subculture as defined by White and Wyn (2013) is fluid, changing over time and associated through music genre or shared interests, which in this case is online gaming. World of Warcraft (*WoW*) could be considered a neo-tribe, which is described by Maffesoli (1996) and Warde (1994) as a group of heterogeneous individuals who have chosen to join collectively for a specific reason at a particular time and place. Through personal experience I have involved myself within the gaming subculture and neo-tribe of *WoW*. From these experiences it appears as if interchanging between different subcultures is highly accepted by youths in the 21st century, due to it being seen as either a 'fad' or an individual trying to find themselves within this world of mass-consumerism.

Post-subcultural theory has been based on the work of Weber, Baudrillard and Maffesoli. Post-subcultural theory is an appropriate framework for discussing the subculture of online gaming, through its modern theories and that youth choose their style in creation of their identity. Although this theory completely rejects the use of the term 'subculture' and focuses on styles, neo-tribes, scenes and lifestyles selected by the individual. Online gaming allows youth, female youth in this instance - to have multiple roles within the subculture. Different roles depend on the player's gender and what they desire to accomplish with their characters. Although, for other types of subcultures, post-subcultural theory is reasonably flawed in the way it examines subcultures that are fairly styled or class based (Robards & Bennett 2011). The massive effect the Internet has on culture and structure within youth needs further study by post-subculturalists due to it being a new concept (Robards et al. 2011).

Post-subcultural theorists White and Wyn (2013) believe that identity exists only when an individual engages with the subculture rather than it being a feature of the individual, however this may not be the case. Personal experiences from engaging in several different subcultures and neo-tribes, having diverse interests and having different experiences in life, creates who you are. I have indulged in many different subcultures such as the alternative emo style, tomboy, sporty/athletic and others, which I have used to create my identity and find myself, only to realise that people are not just one identity but are a mix of identities. Personally, identity does not have to consist of one interest, one style or one subculture. Identity is ever changing

and different for everyone and may incorporate multiple subcultures and identities in one to create an individual. In support of my personal theory of identity, Hopkins (2010) says identity is created through differences and similarities to diverse people and social groups.

WoW, as described by Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell and Moore (2006), is the most popular Massively Multiplayer Online game (MMO), with over 6 million people subscribed to this recreational activity. The game itself initially involves the player creating a character, (toon or avatar); choose the appearance of their character and their specialisations, for example mining, blacksmithing or leatherworking. Through the use of avatars in online gaming, youth are able to create their own identity however they desire to be perceived in the game, whether it be gender, race, class or ethnicity. Players can change their physical appearance and online persona whenever they want. This allows them to take on a whole new role within the gaming subculture (Crow & Bradford 2007). The role of females within the gaming subculture is underrepresented and subdued by the male gamers due to the female role being undermined. Female online gamers are not taken seriously by the male population, which believes that female gamers only play because they are introduced to the game by their partners, and that females are unaware of how to play *WoW* correctly (Yee 2008). Beavis and Charles (2005) discuss how computer games are used as a resource for young people to experiment with identities and challenge expectations. Identity that is created online has been found to be a virtual extension of one's ideal self (Bessiere, Seay & Kiesler 2007). Bessiere et al. (2007) discuss how the creator/gamer will create their character as their idealised self; therefore the character would consist of more favourable attributes than what they believed their appearance is. Individuals with lower psychological wellbeing are more likely to make their character more appealing than themselves. This shows that the role of subculture, in the case of online gaming, allows youth an alternative lifestyle to their own and allows youth to explore different aspects of identity to assist in the creation of their own.

Personally from playing *WoW* for 1,375 hours, I have interacted with numerous online gamers through online text chat and through using a microphone and headset to communicate verbally. Through these interactions, a majority of the dialogue was negative when it came to me being a female *WoW* gamer. I would be discriminated against and not taken seriously. I was told that I was unaware of how to play the game and that I must have been extremely unattractive and overweight, or that if I was a female why was I 'not in the kitchen?' Even though I had played the equivalent of over 57 days straight, I was still told that I was incapable of being equally competent in comparison to any male gamer in *WoW*. I witnessed similar discrimination towards other female gamers, and also witnessed male gamers insulting the female gamer population when interacting with each other. In comparison to an individual's perception of female gamers, from having a producer/ consumer society, female gamers are seen in the producer society as extremely attractive, thin, pretty, tall individuals that are sexualised and shown to be either half naked or completely unclothed when gaming. Females in MMO games are also perceived by male gamers as fantasy and imaginary and that they are older men pretending to be a females (Yee 2008). These perceptions are also extremely evident to the broader community through the use of Google images when 'female gamers' is searched, although there is the exception of the occasional overweight female in assisting the male population with their belief of female gamers being overweight and unattractive. Yee (2008) also discusses how a relationship between a female gamer and her partner who also plays online is a legitimate method for other players to determine the

person's actual gender, because two thirds of female gamers are introduced to the game by their romantic partner. In the gaming subculture there seems to be a perception that *WoW* gamers are of a higher class than other gamers due to the cost of the game and its monthly fees, compared to other games where you only have to buy the game. This provides a perception that *WoW* gamers have a higher disposable income. From personal experiences through interactions with friends and acquaintances about playing *WoW*, it was evident that individuals assumed I had a good steady income.

In conclusion, the role of females in the MMO *WoW* is highly underrepresented, sexualised and discriminated against by other male gamers and social media whether it is directly or indirectly. Through personal experiences I have been able to witness firsthand how females are highly sexualised and discriminated against as well as how their role within the game is extremely undermined. Post-subcultural theory can be applied to gaming and the neo-tribe *WoW* due to both the theory and the neo-tribe of *WoW* online gaming being newly established and in modern terms. This theory also shows that youth culture is not a reflection of class background but more an individual choice and is flexible in a consumer society, although the theory needs further work and contains multiple flaws (Robards & Bennett 2011).

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About the author

I have always wanted to extend myself in further education at university. From a young age I have always had a love for understanding people, society and the world. I am currently enrolled in Psychological Science and would like to further my studies through either criminology or sociology.