

# MASTER'S THESIS

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**The dual nature of gaming. How social hierarchy influence heterogeneous consumption in online consumption communities.**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the role of social hierarchy in shaping consumption practices within an online gaming consumption community. Our empirical data consists of two phases of data collection. First, we applied virtual ethnography over a period of 3 months for developing a comprehensive understanding of the community. Second, we conducted interviews with the community members based on their hierarchical positions. Four sub-groups exist in the community: Militia, Troopers, Leaders and Founders. Our findings show different paths of tensions. First, core members dispute over authentic consumption practices. Second, core and non-core members dispute over rules and conventions. These are the main driver of tensions and heterogeneity during consumption. Conflicts emerge when non-core members dispute the rules and conventions and the leaderships ideas of authentic consumption. Nevertheless, non-core members undergo a “dual nature” of experiences when adapting to the community culture for achieving fun gaming. We discuss how a constant minor friction exists between hierarchical members of online gaming community that can have both positive and negative outcomes. We show how our findings contribute to consumer research.

## **Preface**

This Master-thesis is the concluding component of the Master of Science in Business program at Nord University, with the specialization of International Business and Marketing. I have chosen to write the paper in the form of an article with an introductory chapter rather than a normal structured master-thesis. I chose this form as it is more compact and to the point which fits my academic style. First, I want to thank my supervisor, Frank Lindberg for his excellent guidance, knowledge, and ideas he provided me with during this period. Frank provided me with the necessary components to succeed and for this I am grateful. In addition, I would like to thank Karoline Lauritzen for providing much moral support during often stressful times. Lastly, I want to thank my family for all the support and help they have provided me with during my education.

I am choosing *Journal of Consumption Markets & Culture* as the publishing journal, and the article is therefore adhering to this journal's guidelines. <sup>1</sup>

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## **Introductory chapter**

### ***Theoretical Framework***

#### ***Gaming studies***

The field of game studies emerged as a relatively new area of research, marked by the establishment of the Journal of Game Studies in 2001 as the inaugural dedicated journal in the field. Initially, game studies were primarily driven by individual scholars with a personal interest in gaming or disciplines seeking to explore games as a medium for learning (Mäyrä, 2008). With the acceleration of the World Wide Web, there has been a noticeable increase in the production of games, accompanied by a simplification of the development process and greater accessibility for developers with less technical knowledge (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2019). The significant expansion of the electronic entertainment industry underscores the crucial significance of this emerging field of research. Furthermore (Seo et al., 2015) advocated for the convergence of consumer behaviour and game studies, emphasizing the significance of interdisciplinary collaboration. The importance of conducting additional research in game studies is emphasized in Koivisto and Hamari (2019) literature review, where they outline "15 agenda points" consisting of thematic, theoretical, and methodological agendas that serve as a framework for future research in the field.

#### ***Consumption community***

A consumption community refers to a collective of individuals who share a mutual interest in a specific consumption activity and/or ideology (Kozinets, 1999). Research on consumption communities has evolved and branched out into three distinct perspectives; neo-tribes, brand communities and subcultures of consumption (Cova et al., 2012; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Neo-tribes are a group of people that consume in a commercial or non-commercial setting (Cova et al., 2012) elaborate on the concept of tribes within consumption communities by outlining three key features that define them. Firstly, tribes exhibit collective identification, wherein members identify themselves as part of the group and share a sense of belonging. Secondly, tribes are characterized by shared experiences. Lastly, tribes possess the ability to engage in collective action, enabling them to collaborate and take joint initiatives within the community.

Subcultures of consumption are unique subgroups within society that form based on a shared dedication to specific product categories, brands, or consumption activities, self-selecting themselves accordingly (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Schouten and McAlexander

(1995) made significant contributions to our contemporary understanding of consumption cultures and their connection to marketing institutions through their influential research on the Harley-Davidson motorcycle community.

Brand communities are distinct, geographically unbounded communities that revolve around structured social relationships among followers of a particular brand, as described by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). Brand communities can emerge around a wide range of brands, spanning various industries and sectors. The most famous example of these are the communities that have emerged from Apple, Hummer, Coca-Cola.

### ***Heterogeneity***

Husemann and Luedicke (2013) shed light on the concept of heterogeneity through their definition of heterogeneous consumption. They describe it as an «interaction relationship between two or more (groups of) market participants that have mutually exclusive or incompatible goals regarding certain consumption resources and ideologies» (Husemann & Luedicke, 2013, p. 356). Heterogeneous consumption creates conflict. Conflict arises when friction occurs due to disagreements or discrepancies in how certain practices or experiences are perceived or expected to be consumed (Husemann & Luedicke, 2013). Although heterogeneity is a source of conflict within communities, Consumption communities still share a unique ethos, set of beliefs and values, rituals and methods of symbolic expression (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Chalmers Thomas et al. (2012) found that communities maintain continuity even in the face of destabilization caused by heterogeneity.

### ***Methodology***

This chapter consists of an in-depth explanation of the methodology in the article; The dual nature of gaming. How social hierarchy influence heterogeneous consumption in online consumption communities.

### ***Method design***

This chapter consist of the research design employed in our study. This serves as a foundation for our empirical investigation. This article adopts an ontological perspective that acknowledges the existence of multiple realities and emphasizes the interactions between subjects and observers. The ontological approach relies on subjective interpretations, 3 recognizing that truth lies inn the ‘eyes of the beholder’ (Jaspersen et al., 2018). Within social sciences, the epistemological approach has gained wide acceptance due to the challenges associated with studying the human mind. This research paper employs a qualitative

methodology with an ethnographic-inspired approach. Data is gathered through participation, observations with fieldnotes and semi-structured interviews.

Prior to data collection, careful consideration was given to determining the most appropriate epistemological approach for gathering primary data. After thorough evaluation, the ethnographic approach was selected due to its high degree of involvement. In this approach, the researcher actively engages and immerses themselves in the research context, actively participating in activities alongside the group being studied (Jaspersen et al., 2018). This level of involvement allows for a rich and comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics and phenomena under investigation.

Because we are researching the social dynamic between members of a community and its effect on consumption, we need to take part in all these activities ourselves. By joining the community as a normal member and playing the same game as its members it was possible to replicate the entry experience of the community. We also gained a gradual understanding of the community's ethos and structures. With this ethnographic approach it was possible to supplementary data from the semi-structured interviews with our own field notes and experiences.

### ***Data Collection***

Our data collection consists of qualitative primary empirical data from semi-structured interviews as well as supplementary data from the ethnographic involvement with the community.

Qualitative data comprises non-numeric information gathered through interactive and interpretive approaches. Such data sources include verbal expressions and behaviors of research participants, recorded interviews and their transcriptions, written notes documenting observations, visual materials like images and videos, as well as relevant documentation. The process of data collection necessitates active engagement and progression on the part of the researcher. This involves careful preparation for interviews, conducting the interviews, transcribing recorded materials, capturing visual content, and documenting observations through field notes. The cumulative efforts expended in these activities yield a 4 comprehensive set of qualitative data that can be subjected to further analysis and interpretation within the research process (Jaspersen et al., 2018).

Our primary data collection focused on interviews and participatory observation as the main methods. The informants for our research were selected based on three key criteria: (1)

Participants needed to be members of the VD discord community. This criterion arrives out of necessity as the community only resides digitally on discord. (2) Based on the researcher's ethnographical experience the participant needed to actively use the community's voice-chat. Even though members can be a part of the community by just using their text-based chats, the researcher found through participation that members actively indulging in voice chat rooms would have a stronger connection to other members of the community and understanding of the community. (3) The participant needed to actively play Mount and Blade with the VD community. (4) As the study investigates the link between the heterogeneous consumption and hierarchy, participants from different hierarchical belonging were chosen. Semi-structured interviews offer several advantages, including the flexibility to adapt our questions and approach to the subject matter throughout the process. This adaptability enables us to gather information that is highly relevant to our research objectives. Moreover, this approach allows the informants to delve deeper into their perspectives, providing valuable insights, personal reasoning, and opinions. By allowing for more in-depth explanations, semi-structured interviews contribute to a richer understanding of the research topic. The semi-structured interviews were conducted over a span of two months in 2023. Each interview had a duration of approximately 15 to 25 minutes. It is important to note that all the interviews were conducted through digital voice-call platforms without the use of camera streaming. This method allowed for efficient data collection while ensuring the privacy and comfort of the participants in their own chosen environment.

The ethnographic approach was employed over an extended period of more than three months, during which we deeply engaged with the community on an almost daily basis. Our involvement included actively participating in various community activities. When joining the community, we declared our intentions just wanting to play with the group and be apart of it. It was only after some time in the community before starting our data gathering that we found the community fit for our research and asked its leaders and members if we could conduct our research on it and its members. This approach allowed us to immerse ourselves fully in the community, playing the game and communicating in a similar manner to other 5 community members. This level of active participation facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the community's dynamics, norms, and practices, contributing to a rich ethnographic exploration of the research subject.



### ***Sampling***

The researchers used purposeful sampling to choose participants for these interviews. This sampling method fits well with the research as it provides a rich and in-depth understanding of phenomenon with a small sampling size (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A sample refers to a subset of the population that is utilized to make inferences based on available evidence (Jaspersen et al., 2018). When sampling participants for the primary data set which were our interviews, no regards to age, gender or nationality were taken into account. This was to some extent because this information was deemed uninteresting for our study, but also because participants operated under different aliases and avatars online. We found that participants would often be uncomfortable revealing any personal information about themselves.

Initially participants were meant to be chosen from another community, but the initial community chosen for the study collapsed in early Jan. 2023, leaving us no choice but to look for another community. Vestmar Dominion community was an obvious choice as we had prior knowledge of its existence and knew this kind of community would be open to our research. As mentioned in Data Collection the informants for our research were selected based on three key criteria:

- (1) Participants needed to be members of the VD discord community.
- (2) Based on the researcher's ethnographical experience the participant needed to actively use the community's voice-chat.
- (3) The participant needed to actively play Mount and Blade with the VD community.
- (4) As the study investigates the link between the heterogeneous consumption and hierarchy, participants from different hierarchical belonging were chosen

### ***Interviews***

The main data gathering source for our research were semi-structured interviews. This form of data gathering where the best fit for our research as it is the most common form of data gathering method for qualitative research (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Semi-structured interviews have gained popularity due to their flexibility, accessibility, and ability to uncover significant and concealed information and behaviours (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Semi-structured interviews can vary from a very focused set of questions to a more loosely based conversation (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The goal of conducting these interviews is to extract information about a phenomenon from an informant with their worldview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Our first stage was to create the interview guide. The first iteration of this guide was based on questions that the researcher thought best would lead to an understating of both the community as well as answering the research question. Much attention was given to questions about the informant's consumption, and they had or had not changed their consumption based on influence from the community. This first iteration ended up being too broad and many informants would end up talking about information and experiences not related to the research question. In the first few interviews conducted this was fixed by continuously asking follow-up questions when the informant spoke about relevant information. We also asked informants to elaborate on gamer jargon and other gamer expressions such as "could you elaborate on..." to get an understanding of the meaning (Jaspersen et al., 2018). This approach led to the interview guide remaining unchanged and more serving as a general guide where the most interesting data was obtained through true follow-up questions. The duration of the interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 15 minutes. The experiences from the first few interviews gave us the knowledge to ask better follow-up questions later.

### ***Data analysis***

Following the interviews, we utilized an automated software to transcribe the audio files into text format. Subsequently, we performed a thorough quality check on the transcribed text, ensuring accuracy and formatted the quotes from both the informant and the interviewer. After these steps, we were left with approximately 27,000 words of transcribed interviews that we aimed to condense down to the essential data. To gain a deeper understanding, we opted for a dual approach. We employed meaning condensation, which involves coding and condensing the expressed meaning of the interviewees into concise formulations. This process compresses lengthy statements into shorter ones while retaining the core essence of what was said. Additionally we implied hermeneutic interpretation where "interpretation of textual data proceeds through a series of part to-whole iterations" (Thompson, 1997, p. 441). With this data we identified significant patterns of meaning that surface across the consumption narratives of the different heretical groups the consumers reside in (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Subsequently, we conducted inter-textual analyses to enable the theorization of the implications of hierarchy on heterogeneous consumption within the community.

### ***Quality***

Jaspersen et al. (2018) states that to meet the required quality criteria for qualitative research the researcher must analyze all their data. For qualitative research to be considered valid, it is not necessary for it to fully adhere to all the standards of qualitative research, such as

objectivity, statistical generalizability, and replicability. However, it should strive to meet these standards to the best of its ability. Nonetheless, if the research lacks uniqueness, it cannot be classified as qualitative research. (Jaspersen et al., 2018). To enhance the quality of our research, we have meticulously crafted our methodology in accordance with established standards. We have made conscious efforts to maintain objectivity, promote replicability, and place significant emphasis on ensuring the uniqueness of our research. To ensure adherence to these standards, we took meticulous measures to document our empirical data at every stage of the data analysis process. This included preserving the audio files, interview transcriptions, and condensed interview transcripts. By maintaining these records, we have facilitated the researchers' ability to revisit and cross-check the data whenever necessary.

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## Scientific article

# The dual nature of gaming. How social hierarchy influence heterogeneous consumption in online consumption communities.

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**Key Words:** Social hierarchy, Online consumption community, Heterogeneous consumption, Authentic consumption.

### *Abstract*

This article examines the role of social hierarchy in shaping consumption practices within an online gaming consumption community. Our empirical data consists of two phases of data collection. First, we applied virtual ethnography over a period of 3 months for developing a comprehensive understanding of the community. Second, we conducted interviews with the community members based on their hierarchical positions. Four sub-groups exist in the community: Militia, Troopers. Leaders and Founders. Our findings show different paths of tensions. First, core members dispute over authentic consumption practices. Second, core and non-core members dispute over rules and conventions. These are the main driver of tensions and heterogeneity during consumption. Conflicts emerge when non-core members dispute the rules and conventions and the leaderships ideas of authentic consumption. Nevertheless, non-core members undergo a “dual nature” of experiences when adapting to the community culture for achieving fun gaming. We discuss how a constant minor friction exists between hierarchical members of online gaming community that can have both positive and negative outcomes. We show how our findings contribute to consumer research.

### *Introduction*

This paper investigates what role social hierarchy has for heterogeneous consumption in a virtual consumption community. Social hierarchy refers to the organization of individuals or groups into higher or lower positions of power, influence, or prestige within a society, often based on factors such as social class, race, gender, or occupation (Anderson et al., 2012) . Whereas previous research has investigated gaming community heterogeneity more generally (Kristiansen et al., 2022), this study focuses more specifically on the role that social hierarchies might have in influencing consumption in an online community. Consumers meet in communities where the consumption activity is essential for communion and

socializing activities (Chen et al., 2008) where sharing fantasy and commitment are central (Kozinets et al., 2004).

The gaming community this study is based upon is called VD (Vestmar Dominion). Here players gather in the virtual space thru voice-chats and text-chats to play the videogame Mount and Blades Bannerlord Persistent Empires (hereafter, Mount and Blade) with other players in the VD community.

Mount and Blade is a medieval online roleplaying game where players gather in groups to form kingdoms, creating and maintaining castles and fight against other players kingdoms. This game takes place on a persistent server with around 300 players but can fit 750 players. Persistent mean that the world is always evolving, the game never stops like other games with a match or round system. If a player logs out the remaining players on the server will be able to affect the world regardless of how many or few players are on the server at a given time.

VD was founded for players to socially meet and play videogames, so these two activities are intertwined. The community is also a virtual gathering place for members and non-members to take part in other online hedonic activities such as watching movies, discussing hobbies, and playing other games. Like other consumption communities, the VD community develops their own unique consumption culture, which is shaped by a range of factors including social norms, values, and history (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

The VD community uses the social media platform Discord where members and non-members of VD interact. Non-members are individuals who have access Discord but who have limited access to voice and text channels. Consequently, a large number of activities of the community are reserved for members, such as informational chats about the community's plans, voice chats where members only can interact and online registration to community arranged events.

Within VD like most other gaming communities there exists a formal and administrative hierarchy that regulates members' ability to change the structure of the online space the community is in and their influence over other players. This can be actions such as creating and publishing information to members, creating voice-rooms, accepting new members, and banning members. In the game this social hierarchy can be identified through different roles, decision making and responsibilities. The distinction between core members (those that have been formally accepted into the community) and non-core members (those who has not) is prevalent withing the VD community. These distinction between the consumers crates a

heterogenic consumption within the community defined as “an interaction relationship between two or more parties that pursue mutually exclusive or incompatible goals” (Husemann & Luedicke, 2013, p. 335)

Non-core users can be further distinguished as either tourists who do not claim any membership status, and immigrants who long to become core users, which are referred to as “citizens” (Bellezza & Keinan, 2014, p. 399). According to Donnelly (1981); Fox (1987), two notable characteristics of communities are that they consist of individuals with varying levels of commitment to the central activity, and that the activity tends to dominate the lifestyle of those who are considered hard-core members of the subculture. In their 2015 study, Seo et al. (2015, p. 355) identified a gap in the literature regarding how consumers' connections within a shared virtual space shape their consumption of video games, and in their paper Seo et al. (2019), they emphasized the need for further research to explore community practices within online game consumption. This substantiates the need for further understanding of the link between a consumer's hierarchical position in a community and their consumption. We ask the following research question: *How do social hierarchy influence heterogeneous consumption in an online consumption community.*

## ***Theory***

### ***Heterogenous consumption***

Lindberg & Mossberg (2019, p. 109) points out how consumer research has paid much attention to how consumption tends to forge people together into communities with a sense of collective being. According to studies on consumption communities (Cova et al., 2015; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), individuals strive to establish social connections within communities that reflect a shared way of life. Husemann and Luedicke (2013) explains heterogenous consumption through their explanation of consumer mediated conflict, where friction arises through how practices or experiences are/are not “supposed” to be consumed. Heterogenous consumption can be defined as “interaction relationship between two or more (groups of) market participants that have mutually exclusive or incompatible goals regarding certain consumption resources and ideologies” (Husemann & Luedicke, 2013, p. 356). Husemann and Luedicke (2013) developed three patterns; (1) Emancipatory conflicts, where consumers are in conflict with a market agent. (2) Ideology-advocating conflicts, where consumers vs (non-) consumers have a disagreement over the morality or ideology of a consumption object. For example, owners of a diesel consuming SUV might be in an ideology conflict with climate activist. (3) Consumption-mediated social conflict, the last and



especially important to understand in regard to heterogeneous consumption in consumption communities. An example of this is how consumers might dispute over what kind of consumption that is relevant or authentic in a community. Disagreements between consumers about what constitutes an authentic consumption style can lead to a violent and non-violent correction (Husemann & Luedicke, 2013, p. 357). Lindberg and Mossberg (2019) Found that despite appearing unified, Communities are not entirely homogeneous. Communities have the ability to maintain continuity even in the face of destabilization caused by heterogeneity (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2012). The preservation of continuity within communities is facilitated by the interdependence of community members in terms of social and economic resources. Giesler (2007) showed how conflict and heterogeneity can take place in any market through his exploration of marketplace drama.

### ***Social Structure in Online Consumption Communities***

Research shows that hedonic consumption communities have an underlying social structure and a hierarchy (Dupont, 2014). Factors such as commitment and authentic consumption influences this social hierarchy and the members (Fox, 1987). Consumption communities share a unique ethos, set of beliefs and values, rituals and methods of symbolic expression (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Research on the skater culture shows how newcomers to a community are forced to adapt the established understanding of a skateboarder in order to be accepted into the community and gain the rewards of membership (Dupont, 2014). This was done through newcomers interaction with core members and objects that held high levels of subcultural capital in that community. Kristiansen et al. (2022) found that some members would leave a community if they did not accept the hierarchical status within the consumption community. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) Research showed the existence of subgroups all with different social structures and hierarchies with different interpretations of the biker ethos in the Harley Davidsons consumption community. Individuals have been shown to achieve a sense of pride by belonging to a consumption community to the point where they are willing to conform to what the consumption community regards as authentic consumption (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010). Research on the punk community shows a differentiation of members in a community based on their involvement and commitment to the punk style and values, The inner circle (hardcore and softcore) and the non-members (spectators) (Fox, 1987).

Bellezza and Keinan (2014) expanded on this with the introduction of core and non-core member, where core members are fully fledged members of a consumption community with all

the rights and benefits while non-core members consume true a non-core offering. Non-core offering meaning that they merely imitated the consumption of the core members or outright consume in a way not in line with the cores' opinion of authentic consumption. They also introduce subcategories of Non-core members to better reflect this groups behaviour. Non-core members are referred to immigrants and tourists, Immigrants claim membership and authentic consume but is not granted membership by the core members due to deviation of what the core regards as correct (Bellezza & Keinan, 2014). Tourists do not claim membership or any level of authentic consumption but are merely imitating the core members, or visiting the community, consuming as and with the core members (Bellezza & Keinan, 2014).

Core members play a significant role in shaping the culture and values of the community, and they use this influence to socialize new members into the community's norms and practices. These members often act as gatekeepers, enforcing rules and norms and determining who is allowed to join the community. Core members influence new members through mentoring, socialization, and the use of sanctions and rewards to enforce community norms. Husemann et al. (2015) showed how Core members play an important role in shaping the culture and identity of consumption communities. The potential for conflict can arise as new members navigate the community's norms and values. Lindberg and Østergaard (2015) showed how the consumers may be caught in paradoxical situations while consuming, not wanting to conform to their consumption role. They showed how conflict arises from a skilled consumer being put in the consumption role of an unskilled consumer.

### ***Heterogeneity Due To Social Hierarchy***

With core and non-core members in a consumption community conflict might arise from what members consider authentic consumption. Husemann and Luedicke (2013, p. 357) shows this through their concept of Authenticity protecting conflicts. Conflict over authenticity is a common occurrence in consumer communities. Individuals often make competing claims of ownership over the same consumption object or practice. Such conflicts can happen when members of a community use different criteria to evaluate the appropriate consumption within the group. Core members of a community are more likely to defend their investment in the community's identity against associations with inauthentic individuals and practices (Arsel & Thompson, 2011). The primary point of contention is typically the definition of what constitutes an authentic or legitimate consumption practice for a particular object, and this dispute can arise from differences in attitudes, tastes, or lifestyles (Husemann & Luedicke,

2013). Another source of conflict may be the competitive mindset that occurs in online consumption communities. Members may compete for positions and recognition in the community and argue over the validity of information and practices, they may also try to undermines each other's reputation (Humphreys, 2008).

### ***Method***

The investigation into online multiplayer computer gaming communities is guided by an ethnographic approach combined with interviews. This is a widely utilized approach investigating phenomena of consumption communities (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Kristiansen et al., 2022; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). The conventional methodology of ethnographic fieldwork has been successfully adapted to the virtual domains of gaming and online platforms, where participants engage in discourse (Hine, 2008; Markham, 2016). Over the span of three months the researcher took part in VD community's online activities to acquire a high degree of the technical and social knowledge of how the community works as this is required for ethnographical research (Atkinson, 2007).

The researcher took active part in both the social and hedonic gaming activities with a high degree of participation and noted down information with fieldnotes and video-based multimedia. In the second phase the researcher conducted 13 in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of the community. The researchers used purposeful sampling to choose participants for these interviews. This sampling method fits well with the research as it provides a rich and in-depth understanding of phenomenon with a small sampling size (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Due to the researchers' knowledge of the community and the game, purposeful sampling was chosen, and four criteria were formulated based on this knowledge.

Participants were chosen by the following Four criteria:

- (1) Participants needed to be members of the VD discord community. This criterion arrives out of necessity as the community only resides digitally on discord.
- (2) Based on the researcher's ethnographical experience the participant needed to actively use the community's voice-chat. Even though members can be a part of the community by just using their text-based chats, the researcher found through participation that members actively indulging in voice chat rooms would have a stronger connection to other members of the community and understanding of the community.
- (3) The participant needed to actively play Mount and Blade with the VD community.

(4) As the study investigates the link between the heterogeneous consumption and hierarchy, participants from different hierarchical belonging were chosen.

This sampling method was chosen due to the researcher's knowledge of the population being studied, and the participants were chosen from about 200 members. This sampling method is necessary as it provides a rich and in-depth understanding of phenomenon with a small sampling size.

Furthermore, the researcher made sure that the participants were chosen from the entire spectre of the social hierarchy of the VD community. This hierarchy consist of four different ranks within the community. The bottom Militia are members on a trail period to get accepted into the community. Then the majority Troopers, fully accepted members. After comes Leaders, the middle management of the community in charge of leading the lower ranks. And on the top Founders, the founders have absolute power in the community and are in charge of directing the Leaders and delegating responsibilities.

The semi-structured interviews were done over a period of 2 months in 2023, and most interviews lasted about 25 min. All the interviews were conducted over digital voice-call without camera streaming. Through purposeful sampling participants where chousen based on their hierarchical position/ Discord rank in the community. A direct approach was taken by the researcher to find and acquire participants for the interviews. The researcher would participate in social activities withing the VD community and directly ask individuals who fit the criteria and were available at that time or the near future. This approach was chosen out of necessity as it became a great challenge to get any responses to open invitation posted withing the community, so a more direct approach was needed. It was also hard to get participants to commit to attend and interview scheduled at a set date and time so asking participants that where available (online) at the time was necessary.

Synonym	Discord Rank	Core/Non-core	Gender	Time in community
Militia 1	Militia	Non-core	Male	6 Days
Militia 2	Militia	Non-core	Male	4 Days
Militia 3	Militia	Non-core	Male	5 Days
Trooper 1	Trooper	Core	Male	2 Months
Trooper 2	Trooper	Core	Male	2-3 Months
Trooper 3	Trooper	Core	Male	1 Month

Trooper 4	Trooper	Core	Male	2-3 Months
Trooper 5	Trooper	Core	Male	1 Month
Trooper 6	Trooper	Core	Female	8 Days
Leader 1	Boyard	Core	Male	2 years
Leader 2	Boyard	Core	Male	2 years
Founder 1	Founder	Core	Male	2 years
Founder 2	Founder	Core	Male	2 years

*Tabell 1: List of Interview participants*

During the interviews, the researcher used the terms "community" and "clan" interchangeably, as players within the VD community commonly refer to themselves as "clan" using gaming jargon. The interviews started with asking the participants about their entry into the VD community and how long they had been a part of it. The researcher then moved on asking question about their position in the community, what they did in the clan and why. This was to establish their social and hierarchical position as well as getting them to elaborate on other members positions and responsibilities. Then the questions progressed to how they played with a clan vs by themselves, using knowledge from the ethnographical approach about the community and game mechanics, asking the participants about rules and restriction to gameplay imposed by the clan. After the participants gave their account of the community's consumption practice, they were asked about their motivation for taking part in these practices and why/how these practices came to be and by whom they were decided. The participant was asked if these practices where a source of friction in the community and whether conflicts arouse from them. Follow-up questions were asked about what the role or hierarchy played in these conflicts. The researcher would ask follow-up questions to any topics that were found interesting.

The analysis of how social hierarchy influence heterogeneous consumption is guided by hermeneutic interpretation where "interpretation of textual data proceeds through a series of part to-whole iterations" (Thompson, 1997, p. 441). Initially, the interview transcripts undergo intra-textual analysis to arrive at individual interpretations of each informant. The second step involves the researcher identifying significant patterns of meaning that surface across the consumption narratives of the different heretical groups the consumers reside inn (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 207). Subsequently, in the third step, inter-textual analyses are conducted to enable the theorization of the implications of hierarchy on heterogeneous

consumption within the community. Informants have been given pseudonyms and anonymity throughout the text.

**Findings**

We answer the research question by organizing the findings into three parts; General findings where we present findings connected to the general structure and culture within VD. Then we present our findings on how convention create tensions. And finally, our findings on how players are sacrificing fun in order to secure social security and organizational structure.

**General findings:**

The VD community’s heretical structure can be divided into the traditional power pyramid consisting of four levels. On top the Founders of the community, a tight knitted group of long-time friends that are the dictators of the community. Underneath Leaders appointed by the founders based on the founders’ social preferences as well as their communal social status, game knowledge and respectability from other community members. Most community members consist of normal members referred to as Troopers by the community. These members are core-members fully accepted with the privileges that entails. On the bottom are the non-core members called Militia. These members are not fully accepted into the community and can be seen as on trial to become a Trooper. These four groups make up the hierarchy pyramid of the VD community

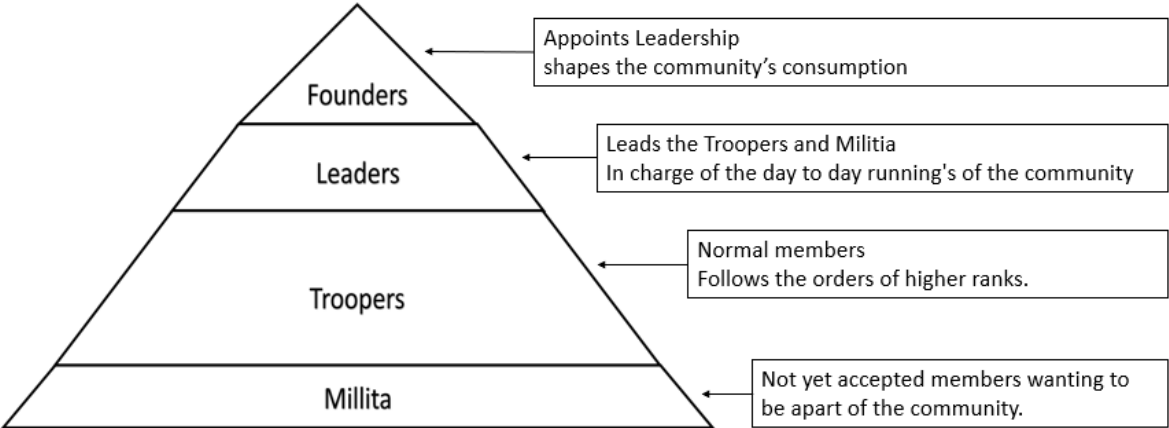


Figure 1: Vestmar Dominion Community Hierarchy Pyramid.

The Power Structure in VD is absolute. When asked about the reason for this hierarchical structure of the clan Founder 2 said this:

*“We've tried, you know, democracy type clan, we've tried it, leadership team was a democracy, and it would be constant argument, constant fighting, nothing gets pushed*

*forward.*” (Founder 2)

*“Now I don't want to say it's a dictatorship but it's a more of a leadership role approach we've taken for this clan and it's worked.”* (Founder 2)

*“But it is a dictatorship though on paper?”* (Interviewer)

*“Yeah, yeah, It's a dictatorship but basically I mean this Community has gone from it come from four of us to 700 in about two years.”* (Founder 2)

Based on our analysis, we can infer that the community hierarchy model of dictatorship, as represented by VD, has emerged organically due to the Leaders and Founders' emphasis on the community's expansion and their capacity to enact, rather than prioritizing the notion of a democratically lead community. Furthermore, our data suggests that leaders and founders are preoccupied with rules and conventions. These quotes also supports Humphreys (2008) previous findings where players in a community may try to undermines each other's reputation. Founders change from a flat leadership structure to a dictatorship was guided by instances of conflict especially in-between lower leadership.

Kristiansen et al. (2022) identifies two different skills in online gaming, practical and strategic skill. Strategic skill would be what we define as game knowledge. The players understanding of game logics and their ability to foresee the outcomes of actions taken in game. While Kristiansen et al. (2022) findings indicates the players skill level as the main factor of their social hierarchical position in a community. Our findings show that only the low-ranking members of a community considers skill a determining factor for leadership position. While leaders explain their position being derived from game knowledge, social respect, and managerial skills, not their skill level in game.

When asked about the hierarchy structure and leadership members gave an account of what they believed was the criteria for becoming a leader in the VD community.

*“To be a good leader in this game, you also need to have the mechanical skills”* (Militia 1)

*“First of all, like they are good at melee better than you.”* (Trooper 5).

During the interviews with the Founders and Leadership, we observed a dissonance between the leadership qualities deemed important by the Militia and Troopers, and the actual criteria established by the founders for appointing individuals to leadership roles. The Troopers and Militia members place significant emphasis on the game-related skills of the community's leaders as a determinant of success. This can be seen true Trooper 5 emphasis on being good at “melee” which refers to the characters ability to win a sword fight against another

character. Whereas the Leaders and Founders specify that individuals' game knowledge, social status, and managerial abilities are the primary factors governing their position in the community's social hierarchy.

*“you look for someone who is sort of respected and liked.”* (Founder 1)

*“Game knowledge, yes. Mechanical skill (Game skill), not a priority.”* (Founder 2)

### ***Troopers/Militia VS Leaders and Founders: How convention create tensions***

Tension exists between the Militia/Troopers and Leaders/Founders due to differing views on authentic consumption, and the conventions created by Leaders/Founders which constitutes the primary source of friction. During the daytime, most Leaders and Founders have real-world responsibilities that prevent them from being present online to oversee the community's activities. Consequently, in the absence of strong leadership, many Troopers and Militia members conform to their individual consumption practices.

*“Well, if I play by myself, I will just ride around charge straight in and go for kills. I have a lot more fun but when we do have leadership online it's usually because there's a lot more at stake in the battle, so I listen obviously. Oh well, it's kind of a lot more mindless fun. I find with no leadership it's just you're kind of messing around.”* (Trooper 3).

Trooper 3 highlights how members adapt their consumption practices based on the online presence of the community's top hierarchy, comprising Leaders and Founders. While Trooper 3 prefers to engage in combat on horseback gaining kills by charging into the enemies, the Leaders and Founders in VD disapprove of this consumption practice and do not promote it. When asked whether non-conformity to his concept of authentic consumption caused tension, Leader 1 had the following response:

*“It definitely causes tensions every now and then when you're telling people to not go out in gear and they want to go out in gear. It's just the fact that a lot of people don't quite understand, if they've not crafted that much, how long it actually takes. For example, if people go and buy heavy horses and go and couch into a pike like an idiot, then the heavy horse takes 5-10 minutes to make and you've just gone and died in 10 seconds.”* (Leader 1)

With “crafting” the Leader 1 is referring to the time and resources other players have put in to make equipment such as horses, weapons, and armor for other people to use. This statement also illustrates how the Leaders knowledge of the game is playing a part in directing his consumption. As Leader 1 has a deeper understanding of the time and resources put into



“crafting” by others and consequences of losing this the action of Trooper 3 creates a tension between them. Leader 1 from a managerial viewpoint looks at Trooper 3s’ mindless fun as a waste of resources and other people’s time.

*“Sometimes they (Troopers and Militia) will get less fun gameplay because I've told them to do something and it's not something that they want to do. I would say that sometimes disputes or arguments can happen over it. I think that most people that come here, they understand that that is the kind of game community you're getting into. And I think that's made clear from the get-go.”* (Leader 2)

The incidents quoted by Leader 2 are recurrent within the VD community. Instances of Founders and Leaders demanding absolute obedience from the Militia and Troops occurred on a nearly daily basis. As noted by Leader 2, members of the VD community are informed from the outset that the community is governed as a dictatorship. Despite members agreeing to this social contract, tensions still arise within the community.

In VD, the upper echelons of the social hierarchy, namely the Leaders and Founders, not only determine the norms of consumption but also enforce them upon their members. Normally members would be verbally warned and even publicly ridiculed in voice chats in front of other members were they to deviate from the “correct way to play”. Non-conformity to the Leaders and Founders' notion of authentic consumption has resulted in members being demoted and deprived of their Discord rank as a disciplinary measure. From Troopers and Militia and even from Leaders we see that a degree of individual heterogeneous consumption exists. Friction arises when the higher-ups in the hierarchy log into the game and the community's voice chats and begin enforcing the community's conventions, leading to tension within the community. Leader 1 and 2 explains this further:

*“When they (new members) join, they then start to adhere to VD's rules”* (Leader 1)

*“If someone ignores your unwritten rules, would they be allowed to stay in the clan?”*

(interviewer)

*“You'd need to do a lot of it before the leadership finally gave up with you and kicked you out of the clan just for that.”* (Leader 1)

*“If they want to join the activity we're doing, then they are kind of forced to conform to whatever requirements at that time.”* (Leader 2)

In certain instances, noncompliance with the rules put forth by the leadership would result in being expelled and banned from the community. Founder 1 and 2 explains that such incidents were mainly related to a member's conduct towards other members, and action was taken by the Founders if some behaviour was deemed unacceptable.

*“5-10 people so far Have been removed”* (Founder 1).

*“Clan rules yes. Some people have broken them, normally insulting other members or being a total jerk. I think we're up to about 6-8 we've kicked due to that.”* (Founder 2)

### ***Tension of adapting to social roles of the game.***

Through interviews and participant observations, a pattern emerged among consumers in the VD community, which indicates a willingness to sacrifice immediate fun in order to obtain other benefits. The two main benefits members were seeking were the social security and the structural order the clan provided. This sacrificing of fun comes in the form of restrictions put forth by the Founders and Leaders on the Militia and Troopers. An example of this is the Cavalry whitelist. Players can choose to play as cavalry in the game there is not mechanic that hinders how many can play this class. In response to this the Leaders and Founders of VD created the Cavalry whitelist, an out of game list of members in the VD community that are allowed to play cavalry when VD plays together. When asked about this Troopers and Militia were happy to comply with these restrictions if they in turn gained benefits from it in the game. Troopers and Militia were willing to sacrifice this gameplay mechanic for the clan to be better organised which would directly lead to a higher chance of succeeding in gameplay. These patterns can be seen through quotes such as:

*«If you want to achieve something, we have to be restricted sometimes. So, I'm okay with getting restricted to one point»* (Trooper 4)

*“Why are to ok with these restrictions?”* (Interviewer)

*“Because I think if I don't do it, there will be some chaos.”* (Trooper 5)

But it is not only the Troopers and Militia that are willing to sacrifice fun. Leaders and Founders would also follow self-imposed restriction and change their gameplay behaviour as explained by Leader 1.

*“Sometimes I can't do the gameplay I want to do. It means that a lot of the time I'll have to switch to do other things that we need at the time because I'm a leader and I know that's my kind of job.”* (Leader 1)

These changes in gameplay and self-imposed restrictions were most of the time revolving around the managerial part of the community. Founders and Leaders thought of their role as facilitators and providers of the communities' key activities. They bore the responsibility of preparing for upcoming activities whenever they were not directly leading or guiding other players.

*“You need the more fun aspects of the game, like the sieges and the big combat. I think they get that (Militia and Troopers), and they get that more successfully because of us leadership.”* (Leader 2).

*“My responsibility is to win Sieges overall.”* (Founder 2)

This perspective held by the Leader 2 and the rest of the leadership regarding their responsibility to provide activities was shared by the Troopers and Militia. They acknowledged that conforming to the leadership's idea of authentic consumption and sacrificing their own enjoyment was necessary to achieve a high level of organization within the community. The ultimate goal of achieving a high level of organization is to succeed in game activities, to win. This drive to ultimately win was a common trait found across all levels of the social hierarchy as Trooper 2 points out.

*“People don't like to lose; they accept that minimum level of organization and hierarchy system”* (Trooper 2).

Founders also believed that the Troopers and Militia were willing to accept these restrictions and trade-off fun for a higher level of organization to ultimately achieve success. Founder 2 explains why he thinks this is the case.

*“Because I think people like direction. I think people like something stable, something in which all the moving pieces come together nicely. I think people also like that the fact sometimes it seems to be an authoritarian style, they know that the people above them are there to look after them.”* (Founder 2)

Members of the community also emphasized the role social security had related to their willingness to offer fun in order to conform to the leadership's authentic consumption. A common mechanic in Mound and blade is when your character would do services for other players such as making food or healing. In return for their time doing these actions other players would pay them in the in-game currency. A trend in the VD community is how

players would do these actions for other players in VD without monetary gain, losing time and resources.

*“But you do lose your time in game, and you don't get anything out of the actions when you do these services for the community for free? Why do you do that?”* (interviewer)

*“Because I have that social gain from it.”* (Trooper 6)

Founders explained this phenomenon with how they were constantly pushing for a culture of giving and supporting each other within the clan. In this case both Founders and Leaders lead by example often giving away resources and in-game currency to members beneath them in the hierarchy.

*“Vestmar Dominion has been cultivated not just to be a clan, nor community as you like to call it. It's like a nationality. It's like people are proud to say I am Vestmar”* (Founder 1)

Common for both Militia, Troopers, Leaders, and Founders is this conforming to the leadership's idea of authentic gameplay. The driving force for this being both ends of the hierarchy pyramids desire to win.

*“We are generally quite nice people and we play other games with people so it's having that balance so I'm assuming yeah, So I'm assuming yeah they just listen because we're successful.”* (Founder 2)

### ***Discussion***

This article introduces Hierarchy as an inseparable part of heterogeneous consumption in an online consumption community. We find two main contributions: 1) The tensions are not only between core vs non-core, but between various sub-groups of the community. 2) Duality matters, i.e. that disputes might be necessary for successful FUN! Through the theoretical lens of heterogeneous consumption, social structure in online consumption communities and heterogeneity due to social hierarchy, we explore how social hierarchy in online consumption communities influences the heterogeneous consumption of its members.

Previous research show how conflicts often involves consumers vs consumers of the same consumer object as the conflict parties and concerns dissent about what constitutes an authentic/legitimate consumption style (Husemann & Luedicke, 2013). Similar to the findings of Husemann and Luedicke (2013), our research identifies friction between consumers concerning authentic consumption. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that friction arises predominantly between consumers occupying different positions in the social hierarchy. The hierarchical power dynamic between the two consumers compels the less powerful individual

to conform to the leadership's notion of authentic consumption. Despite the hierarchical power dynamic that coerces consumers to conform, our research, in agreement with Lindberg and Mossberg (2019) findings, indicates that consumption patterns are not entirely homogenous. Instead, there exists a diverse range of consumption practices and notions of authentic consumption among individuals occupying different positions in the social hierarchy, this to some extent, generates small but persistent friction within the hierarchy. Although consumers inhabit a diverse range of consumption our research demonstrates that social hierarchy has a significant impact on the consumption practices of community members.

Previous research show that core members play an important role in shaping the culture and identity of consumption communities. Core members of a community are more likely to defend their investment in the community's identity against associations with inauthentic individuals and practices (Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Husemann et al., 2015). Our study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating that the core members of a community can be further subdivided on a micro level based on their position in the social hierarchy. Our findings indicate that the individuals occupying the topmost position in the social hierarchy of the core members, play a crucial role in shaping the community's identity and safeguarding it.

Our findings suggest that a prevalent motivator within the social hierarchy is the desire to achieve victory. Moreover, our findings indicate that the primary purpose of the community's formation is to attain success in in-game activities. The social hierarchy plays a critical role in this process, as the objective of winning is accomplished through cooperative efforts that entail compromising individual members heterogenic consumption.

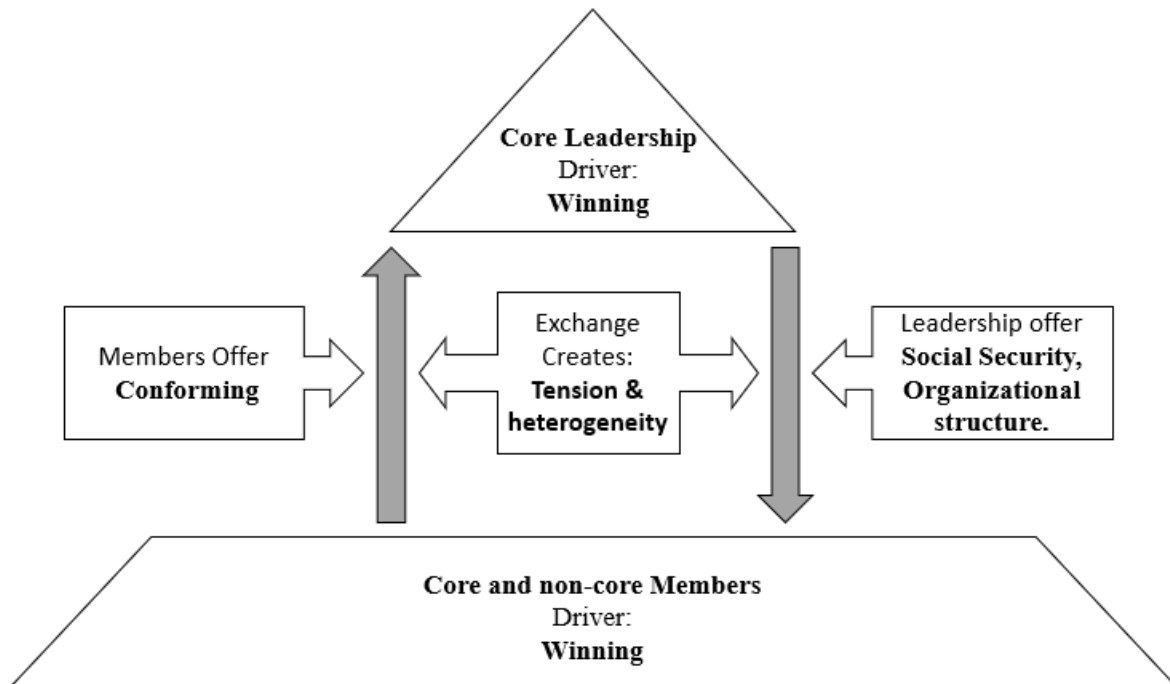


Figure 2: The exchange of offers in the hierarchy and the tension it creates.

The role of the leadership is to facilitate for members of the community to succeed in game activities. In our proposed theoretical model, Figure 2, inspired by the hierarchy pyramid, we illustrate how leadership offer *social security* and *Organizational structure* to its members as these factors are paramount to succeed (See arrow down). In return to these offers from leadership core and non-core members are willing to sacrifice (See arrow down), i.e. they omit their initial dispute and offer conformity to some degree, according to leadership's opinion of authentic consumption. This exchange creates a constant tension and heterogeneity (See between arrows). The function of the leadership in the community is to enable its members to achieve success in the game activities by providing social security and organizational structure. These factors are crucial for success, and the leadership ensures that they are in place. In exchange for these offerings from the leadership, both core and non-core members of the community are willing to conform to some extent to the leadership's perspective on authentic consumption and contribute their diverse consumption practices.

### **Conclusion**

The article answers the research question; *How do social hierarchy influence heterogeneous consumption in an online consumption community*. This article sheds light on the significant influence of social hierarchy on the diverse consumption practices of individuals within an online consumption community. Through a micro lens, we uncover subgroups within the

social hierarchy of core members and examine how they function. Additionally, we reveal that differences in authentic consumption between members in different hierarchical positions contribute to a constant tension within the community. We find two main contributions: 1) The tensions are not only between core vs non-core, but between various sub-groups of the community. 2) Duality matters, i.e., that disputes might be necessary for successful FUN! Overall, our study highlights the importance of considering the impact of social hierarchy when analysing consumption practices in online communities and its implications for future studies. The influence of social hierarchy on heterogenic consumption in online communities is complex and multifaceted and calls for further investigation exploring more variables such as members personalities and how different consumption object might affect the hierarchy structure.

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