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# **Let's start a film club! Mapping participatory spaces in *synchtube.***

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## **Let's start a film club! Mapping participatory spaces in *synchtube*.**

### **Abstract**

The research field in media studies concerning participatory culture has addressed the power imbalances present in mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, criticizing a misleading rhetoric of democratic potential. Questioning whether unequal rather than democratized power relations have well become the denominator for all forms of participatory culture, this thesis considers the construction of participation in *synchtube*, a relatively small underground video-sharing platform. Utilizing an analytical framework for the formatting of spaces of participation, it examines the platform's interface design and routinized user practices as well as addresses unequal power relations between different groups of users active on the platform. This research shows how participation is constructed through the exchange between, and mutual reshaping of, these factors, without losing consideration of their socioeconomic contexts. Furthermore, a discourse analysis of an associated message board reveals reflexive qualities. The analysis of three different channels on the platforms surfaces three different gradations of participatory culture, ranging from non-participation through highly controlled pseudo-participation to possibly democratized forms. This research argues for further research into power inequalities within self-governing online communities as well as non-commercial, underground platforms.



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## Introduction

Video-streaming platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, Livestream and Twitch allow users to watch videos, post comments and “broadcast themselves.” The potential of mediated participation has been widely discussed in scholarly debate, digital industries and popular media alike and affects the everyday media consumption of millions of millennials and early adapters worldwide. Critical digital media scholars William Boddy, Mark Andrejevic, José van Dijck and David Nieborg, among others, have shown how much of the upheaval regarding digital media’s perceived ‘participatory revolution’ is a business discourse grounded in the artificial opposition between new and old media and the over-exaggeration of old media’s passivity.<sup>1,2,3</sup> However, historical comparative analyses of participatory culture do show that present-day media offer more opportunities to participate than their traditional broadcast-era counterparts.<sup>4,5</sup> Television scholar Eggo Müller comments how more recent instances of participatory culture are not as revolutionary as the utopian business discourse would have us believe: “they are actually linked ... to traditional forms of culture and cultural conventions.”<sup>6</sup> In the present scholarly debate there is much attention for whether participating users are being manipulated by misleading discourses. Henry Jenkins, known for a generally optimistic view regarding participation, expresses his concern, stating how “‘participatory culture’ has become an empty signifier often used in very superficial ways by all kinds of groups that want to entice our participation but do not want to give up any real control.”<sup>7</sup> Academics concerned with political economy have criticized current media industry’s power relations in the light of participating audiences; Andrejevic speaks of “a shift in the burden of labor from paid actors and writers to the viewers,”<sup>8</sup> Tiziana Terranova has commented on how the concept of free labor has reconfigured the relations between consumption and production.<sup>9</sup> However, as John Banks and Mark Deuze comment, users are not necessarily unaware of this power distribution and “the relations are much more nuanced than the language of manipulation or exploitation suggest.”<sup>10</sup>

The concerns for a power struggle between large platforms and the many users who navigate them, although urgent, draw attention away from smaller instances of participatory culture. As Müller

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<sup>1</sup> William Boddy, “Redefining the Home Screen: Technological Convergence as Trauma and Business Plan,” in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, ed. David Thornborn and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003), 92-100.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Andrejevic, “The Webcam Subculture and the Digital Enclosure,” in *MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media age*, ed. Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy (London: Routledge, 2003), 109-124.

<sup>3</sup> José Van Dijck and David Nieborg, “Wikinomics and its discontents: a critical analysis of Web 2.0 business manifestos,” *New Media & Society* 11:5 (2009): 855-874.

<sup>4</sup> Nico Carpentier, Peter Dahlgren and Francesca Pasquali, “Waves of media democratization: A brief history of contemporary participatory practices in the media sphere,” *Convergence* 19:3 (2013): 287-294.

<sup>5</sup> Eggo Müller, “Spaces of Participation: Interfaces, Conventions, Routines,” paper read at *Media in Transition 6: Stone and Papyrus, Storage and Transmission* (Cambridge MA, 24-26 April 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Idem, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Jenkins and Nico Carpentier, “Theorizing participatory intensities: A conversation about participation and politics,” *Convergence* 19:3 (2013): 266.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 89.

<sup>9</sup> Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” *Social Text* 63 18:2 (2000): 33-58.

<sup>10</sup> John Banks and Mark Deuze, “Co-creative labor,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12:5 (2009):424.

and Van Dijk both argue, the research field concerning participatory culture is in need for more detailed case studies and analyses.<sup>11,12</sup> Critical theorist Nico Carpentier concurs, urging scholars to investigate “how specific participatory practices are characterized by specific power balances and struggles at different levels, moments, and locations.”<sup>13</sup> Aiming to provide a microanalysis of participation in a small, non-commercial platform, I propose the following case study.

One of the more underground, less than legal video-sharing websites is *synchtube*. In *synchtube*, currently available at <http://cytu.be>,<sup>14</sup> users gather to watch video content curated from a wide range of video-sharing websites. Video playback is synchronized for all viewers, and a simple chat interface allows users to discuss the viewed content. Users can choose from several available channels or opt to create their own. *Synchtube*'s channels are managed by users in the role of administrators and moderators.<sup>15</sup>

Positioning this research on the intersection of new media studies and critical cultural studies, I will focus on how, and under what conditions, participation is being constructed in *synchtube*, and address the role of power relations between different user groups in this process. Since the scholarly understanding of participation has grown to be ambiguous due to popularization of the term,<sup>16</sup> I will first discuss which definition of participation to use in this research.

## 1. Conceptualizing participation

To identify what constitutes participation in *synchtube*, it is necessary to first explore different views on what can, and what cannot be considered as participation. Drawing from political theory, Carpentier regards participation as having foremost to do with “equal power relations in decision-making processes.”<sup>17</sup> Here, ‘decision-making processes’ can be understood in the broadest sense, from micro to macro levels, and it should be noted that equal power relations do not automatically imply overall equal power positions – more likely than not, some groups will be more privileged than others.<sup>18</sup> Carpentier proposes to take Carole Pateman’s definition of full participation, “a process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome

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<sup>11</sup> Müller, “Spaces of Participation: Interfaces, Conventions, Routines.”

<sup>12</sup> José Van Dijk, “Users like you? Theorizing agency in user-generated content,” *Media, Culture & Society* 31:1 (2009): 41-58.

<sup>13</sup> Jenkins and Carpentier, “Theorizing participatory intensities: A conversation about participation and politics,” 267.

<sup>14</sup> Cytu.be is not the only provider of synchronized video playlists on the internet. The first website offering the service, [www.synchtube.com](http://www.synchtube.com), has closed and is no longer available. Others include [cytu.be](http://cytu.be)'s mirror sites <https://synchtube.be> and [www.synchtube.org](http://www.synchtube.org), as well as other alternatives such as <https://sync-video.com> and [www.togethertube.com](http://www.togethertube.com). However, as of writing [cytu.be](http://cytu.be) attracts the most visitors by far.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin Montgomery, 5 March 2014, “Cytu.be 3.0 User Guide,” last modified 12 September 2015, <https://github.com/calzoneman/sync/wiki/CyTube-3.0-User-Guide>.

<sup>16</sup> Ioana Literat, “Interrogating participation across disciplinary boundaries: Lessons from political philosophy, cultural studies, art, and education,” *New Media & Society* 18:8 (2016): 1787-1803.

<sup>17</sup> Nico Carpentier, “Differentiating between access, interaction and participation,” *Conjunctions: Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation* 2:2 (2015), no page numbers.

<sup>18</sup> Carpentier, “Differentiating between access, interaction and participation.”

of decisions,”<sup>19</sup> as an anchoring point when evaluating participatory practices. Carpentier does not expect this point to ever be reached or maintained, but sees it rather as a “reference point that allows for a critical evaluation.”<sup>20</sup> Representing the cultural studies perspective, Jenkins concurs with the notion of ‘true’ participation being an utopian goal of sorts, “meaningful in the ways that it motivates our struggles to achieve it and provides yardsticks to measure what we’ve achieved.”<sup>21</sup>

Lest confusion between the terms ‘access,’ ‘interaction’ and ‘participation’ would cloud the focus on a struggle for more ‘full’ forms of participation, Carpentier strongly argues for clear differentiation between the terms.<sup>22</sup> Access is conceptualized as having to do with (mediated) presence and the absence of restrictions.<sup>23</sup> Carpentier concurs with Jens Jensen’s (1998) definition of interactivity, seeing the concept as “a characteristic of specific media technologies (or systems) that incorporate the possibility of user-content and user-user interaction through the interaction between user and technology.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly to Carpentier, Jenkins also makes a distinction between participation and interaction. He describes interaction as a prestructured activity, whereas participation is “more open-minded, less under the control of media producers and more under the control of media consumers.”<sup>25</sup> Both authors acknowledge that differentiating between interactivity and participation can be challenging at times.<sup>26</sup> In summary, cultural studies regards participatory culture as an aggregation of ideas, circumstances and situations related to, and possibly facilitating, the relations between traditional roles, such as such as found in for example media production, beginning to shift in such a way that new opportunities might arise. However, as Carpentier and Peter Dahlgren comment, there is a clear distinction between the possibility of participation and participation itself:

The presence of a participatory culture cannot be conflated with participation itself and its logics of equal(ised) power relations. Participation has a clear material and actionist dimension, and cannot be reduced to how we think or feel about participation. To put it into simple grammatical terms, to participate is a verb.<sup>27</sup>

Although there are similarities in the ways political theory and cultural studies foreground shifting (power) relations, the conceptualization of participation as discussed by Carpentier allows for a clearer definition. For the course of this research, I would propose to take decision-making *in the broadest sense* as a key characteristic of participation when identifying what processes in *synchtube* could be considered to be participatory. In the following section, I aim to clarify the tools necessary to conduct this research.

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<sup>19</sup> Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1970), 71.

<sup>20</sup> Jenkins and Carpentier, “Theorizing participatory intensities: A conversation about participation and politics,” 267.

<sup>21</sup> Idem, 266.

<sup>22</sup> Nico Carpentier, “The concept of participation. If they have access and interact, do they really participate?” *CM-časopis za upravljanje komuniciranjem [Communication Management Quarterly]* 6:21 (2011): 13-36.

<sup>23</sup> Carpentier, “Differentiating between access, interaction and participation.”

<sup>24</sup> Idem, no page numbers.

<sup>25</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 133.

<sup>26</sup> Jenkins and Carpentier, “Theorizing participatory intensities: A conversation about participation and politics.”

<sup>27</sup> Nico Carpentier and Peter Dahlgren, “Introduction: Interrogating audiences – Theoretical horizons of participation” *CM-časopis za upravljanje komuniciranjem [Communication Management Quarterly]* 6:21 (2011): 8.

## 2. Formatting spaces of participation

Van Dijck calls attention to how social media platforms and video-sharing websites are designed to structure interaction. The ways users can participate are shaped by guiding protocols, such as technical limitations and a website's user agreement.<sup>28</sup> Müller elaborates further upon the notion of participation being shaped by protocols. He proposes a framework "formatted spaces of participation," in which an outline for participation is formulated.<sup>29</sup> By analyzing both a medium's technological and cultural protocols, this framework allows researchers to determine how participation of in a program, platform or website might be structured. It is important to understand that, as they are partly defined by a medium's everyday use, spaces of participation are not set but fluid. They are "co-created and shaped by the recurrent and thus routinized practices of users."<sup>30</sup> The interactions of individual users who 'inhabit' a formatted space of participation are not determined by this space, but rather directed towards a certain shape by its frameworks:

They suggest and stimulate specific activities, attempt to obstruct others, and they allow 'open spaces' that are invaded and structured by users. ... Practices are structured by pre-existing socially and ideologically defined spaces within which actions are performed. These actions may negotiate and transform the very conventions and limits of a given, in this case mediated, space.<sup>31</sup>

Müller does not describe how to utilize the framework in much detail. Rather, he stresses the importance of various powers structuring spaces of participation and shows the framework can be adapted to a variety of case studies. In her monograph on liveness in digital media, Karin van Es operationalizes Müller's framework by differentiating between techno-cultural, economic and legal factors, where techno-cultural factors translate to how both a platform's interface and guidelines are designed.<sup>32</sup> As van Dijck has shown in her analysis of social networking sites, the "architectural design" of these platforms strongly influences the way users conduct themselves.<sup>33</sup> Where van Es considers a platform's rules and conventions to be part of the techno-cultural sphere, I would prefer to discuss interface design and rules and conventions separately. This approach more closely resembles Müller's original outline, where he differentiates between a platform's interface and "routinized forms of user interaction."<sup>34</sup> However, these factors are still very much interrelated. Van Dijck stresses the importance of taking a platform's socioeconomic context into consideration when performing a microanalysis,<sup>35</sup> something I wholeheartedly agree with. Hence, I do not mean to omit the effects of economic and legal factors from this analysis, but rather to discuss them through their relation to *synchtube*'s interface and rules.

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<sup>28</sup> José Van Dijck, "Television 2.0: YouTube and the Emergence of Homecasting," paper read at Media in Transition 5: *Creativity, Ownership and Collaboration in the Digital Age* (Cambridge MA, 27-29 April 2007), 6-7.

<sup>29</sup> Müller, "Spaces of Participation: Interfaces, Conventions, Routines."

<sup>30</sup> Idem, 17-18.

<sup>31</sup> Idem, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Karin van Es, *The Future of Live* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016).

<sup>33</sup> José Van Dijck, "'You have one identity': performing the self on Facebook and LinkedIn," *Media Culture & Society* 35:2 (2013): 199-215.

<sup>34</sup> Müller, "Spaces of Participation: Interfaces, Conventions, Routines," 5.

<sup>35</sup> José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity. A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2013).

A point Carpentier underlines in multiple publications is that to him, participation has very much to do with power imbalances. I intend to incorporate power imbalances between users into the spaces of participation framework. As a structuring factor, power imbalances shape the way participating users can move within a space of participation. The imbalances are themselves structured by a platform's techno-cultural factors, but more than the sum of these factors as without actors to assume the roles of privileged and less-privileged groups and to execute control and resistance, pre-structured power relations remain meaningless. In figure 1, I provide a schematic overview of this framework, picturing the structuring factors discussed in this chapter.

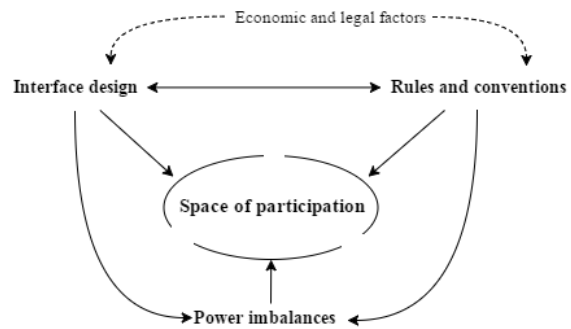


Figure 1. Model of analysis showing the formatting of a space of participation.

### 3. Methodology

This analysis will involve three different channels found in Cytu.be. Considering the arguments made in the previous section, I pose the following research questions:

How is participation constructed in *synchtube*'s channels?

- How does interface design contribute to the construction of participation in *synchtube*?
- How do rules and conventions contribute to the construction of participation in *synchtube*?
- How do power imbalances between regular users, moderators and administrators contribute to the construction of participation in *synchtube*?

As discussed, this research considers participatory processes to be decision-making processes. The most evident decision-making processes in *synchtube* are video selection and video playback. As anyone has the possibility to create and set up a channel of their own, which would require scores of decisions to be made, channel creation identifies as a third participatory process in *synchtube*. However, due to time constraints, this research will be limited to participatory processes in already established channels.

Figure 2 shows the presentation of channels on cytu.be's homepage. While selecting channels for the research corpus, my main concern was for the selection to reflect the diversity found on cytu.be's homepage. Because it was important that the research material would stay available while conducting this research, the channels featured in the analysis were chosen from a pre-selection of the most popular channels.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, channels were discarded from this pre-selection with the most

<sup>36</sup> Each time the researcher visited cytu.be in September 2016, each of these channels was among the top ten channels with most connected viewers.

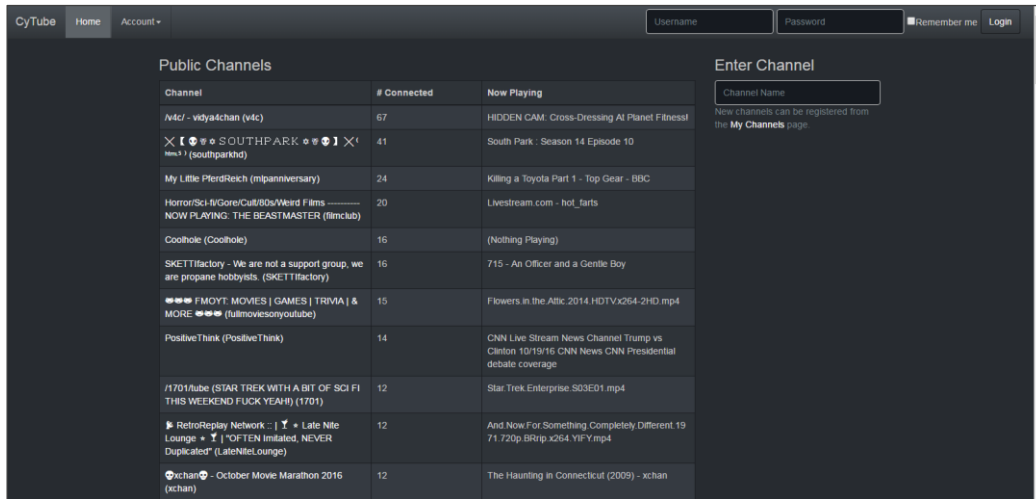


Figure 2. Cytu.be's homepage shows a list of available channels. Screenshot made on 26 October 2016, 16:32.<sup>37</sup>

diverse sample of three channels in mind. I favored *FilmClub* because it seemed to be consistent in both connected viewers and content, and *Vidya4Chan* because it often appears at the top of the list as the most frequented channel and also because it has a long history as *synchtube* channel, predating cytu.be. The last channel to make the selection complete, *SouthPark*, is a themed channel with a number of cousins on cytu.be, but is clearly the most popular channel among its relatives. Each of the three selected channels has a distinct character and a relatively stable number of connected users. The following table offers more information on the specific channels.

Channel	Connected users <sup>38</sup>	Specifics
<i>FilmClub</i> <a href="http://cytu.be/r/filmclub">http://cytu.be/r/filmclub</a>	18	Channel themed around horror, sci-fi and B-movies.
<i>SouthPark</i> <a href="http://cytu.be/r/southparkhd">http://cytu.be/r/southparkhd</a>	42	Channel dedicated to showing SOUTH PARK episodes.
<i>Vidya4Chan</i> <a href="http://cytu.be/r/v4c">http://cytu.be/r/v4c</a>	78	Channel associated with 4chan message boards. Mixed content, short videos.

Table 1. Selection of channels used in analysis.

While conducting this analysis I operated from the position of a participant observer, a newcomer who still has to learn the ins and outs of the social protocols at work. I logged on under the same account name in each channel. Since viewing multiple channels simultaneously results in an automated redirection to cytu.be's homepage, I have cycled through the different channels during research sessions. The browser used was Google's Chrome, and no ad-blockers were enabled during analysis. Research sessions took place in December 2016 and January 2017 and were planned on both working days and weekends, at various hours during the day between 8 AM and 12 PM Central European Time.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> All provided timestamps are in Central European Time.

<sup>38</sup> Average calculated using ten measurements collected between 15 September and 11 October 2016.

<sup>39</sup> No observations were planned during Christmas or New Year's Eve.

The following analysis encompasses three chapters, focusing the three formatting factors discussed in the previous chapter. In chapter 4, I describe the channel interface and its various elements. Each element is discussed in relation to how it contributes to the construction of participatory processes. I consider from which sources the media player allows content to be shown and how the socio-economic context of these carriers implicates content selection. Finally, I discuss and compare the opportunities to participate afforded by each channel's interface design. Chapter 5 discusses cytu.be's rules and conventions. I determine what types of content are prohibited and encouraged, analyze how polls are utilized and examine routinized user practices. Researched material includes the site's terms of use; user guidelines; channel-specific rules and descriptions; available media lists; and routinized interactions displayed in the chat box. *Synchtube*'s channels construct certain expectations based on their names, descriptions and themes, which are also explored in this chapter. To analyze how power imbalances between user groups format participation in cytu.be in chapter 6, I rely on insights uncovered in the preceding chapters. Firstly, it is necessary to identify the different user groups operating in each channel. What are their privileges and responsibilities? Secondly, I examine their differences. How do regular users, moderators and channel administrators relate to each other, and how does this affect participatory spaces? To answer these questions, I look to cytu.be's user guide, observe the channels, and analyze what is being said by moderators and regular users in four discussion threads in *Vidya4Chan*'s 8chan messaging board. 8chan.net is a clone site of 4chan.net, "one of the largest and most notorious internet communities" where the bulk of posts is made by anonymous users.<sup>40</sup> The selected threads represent the five most discussed posts touching upon relations between regular users, moderators and administrators on the board.<sup>41</sup> It should be noted that although other channel of cytu.be might share similarities with the research corpus, only the three channels *FilmClub*, *SouthPark* and *Vidya4Chan* are under discussion. Chapter 7 provides concluding arguments.

#### **4. Interface design as a formatting factor**

Cytu.be's homepage, shown in figure 2, presents a list of accessible channels in order of their numbers of connected users. The option to log in as a registered user is shown at the top right corner of the page. Registering is not compulsory, but it allows users to save certain settings. There are five elements which are present in each channel: the header and footer bars; the media player; a chat box; a polling tool; and a playlist. Additionally, the channels feature other interactive components, such as a note pad in *Vidya4Chan* and a IMBD search bar in *FilmClub*. Sometimes elements in the channel

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<sup>40</sup> Tim Bavluka, "Co/operation and /co/mmunity in /co/mics: 4chan's Hypercrisis," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 13 (2013), doi: 10.3983/twc.2013.0442.

<sup>41</sup> Prior to making the selection, I examined the 25 most discussed threads for relevance. The selected discussions, "unban thread," "rules/report thread," "make me a mod again," "suggestions" and "mod eval discussion thread" are found at <https://8ch.net/v4c/catalog.html>. A more detailed description can be found in Appendix A.

interface are used to link to other related webpages. The interface itself also presents information about the channels and their use, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Figure 3 shows *FilmClub*'s interface, exemplifying the standard elements incorporated in each channel on cytu.be. The header and footer bars, shown at the top and bottom of the page in figure 3, are consistent on each page and channel of cytu.be. They offer user preferences; a copyright claim for Cytu.be's script; links to the freely accessible script; a user agreement; contact page; user guide, and financial information for donations.

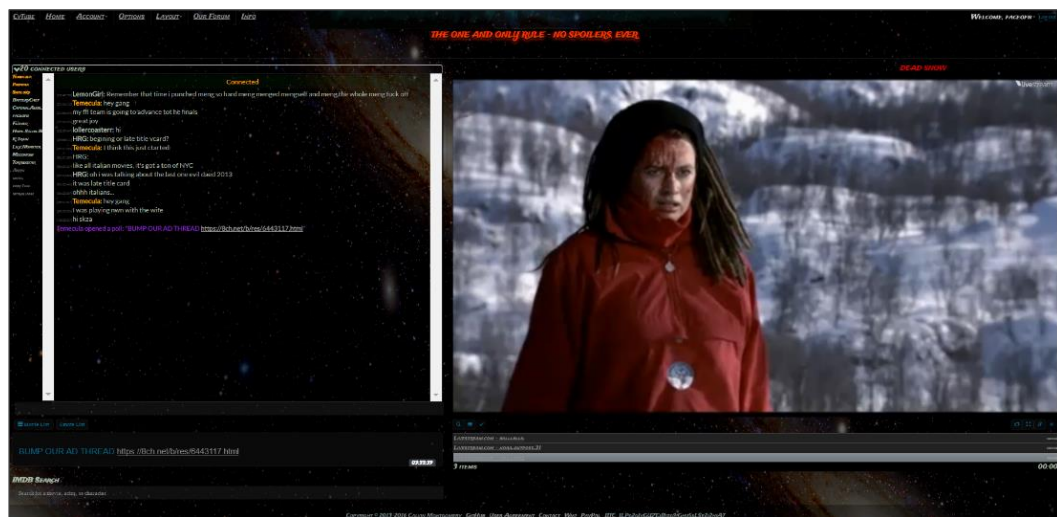


Figure 3. *FilmClub*'s channel interface. Screenshot made on 19 December 2016, 14:35

Cytu.be's interface embeds, modifies and synchronizes media players from other video-sharing websites and streaming platforms, and does not provide its own media player. *Vidya4chan* videos are typically streamed from YouTube, whereas *FilmClub*'s film content is streamed from livestream.com and *SouthPark*'s videos are hosted at streamable.com. Embedding content originally hosted on other video-sharing websites limits the available content to those videos which can be hosted, conforming to these platforms' technical limitations, terms and conditions and other policies. However, some limitations might be circumvented by choosing a different hosting platform. For example, the movies shown in *FilmClub* could not be hosted on YouTube because Google's automatic copyright detection would likely block the video.<sup>42</sup> Instead, the channel streams through Livestream, where copyright infringement issues are handled by a copyright agent and not by an automated system.<sup>43</sup>

To watch a *synchtube* channel constitutes a linear viewing experience in the sense that viewers have no individual control over what video they watch and no ability to navigate playback beyond pressing pause and play. The media player will not resume playing from the point at which it was paused, but instead commence playing the channel's current stream – similar to how turning on and

<sup>42</sup> Google, "how Content ID works," accessed 11 January 2017, [https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2797370?hl=en&ref\\_topic=4515467](https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2797370?hl=en&ref_topic=4515467).

<sup>43</sup> "Livestream Service Terms of Use," last updated 9 November 2009, accessed 11 January 2017, <http://original.livestream.com/terms/generalterms>.



off a broadcast television channel will not pause the actual broadcast. Controls embedded into the media player interface include “show fullscreen,” “reload media player” and a “skip-button.” The skip-button functions to enable “voteskipping,” a process which can skip the current video – if enough users press the button.

The chat box allows users to interact with each other through private or public text messages. A limited amount of images, “emotes,” can be used as text as well. Unless content is viewed in fullscreen or the chat is hidden by choice, users will always see the video content accompanied by commentaries. According to Müller, YouTube and other video-sharing sites have a dialogic structure.<sup>44</sup> A similar structure is prevalent in cytu.be’s channels, where the chat box, together with the media player, is presented as the center of attention. Not only does the chat show the names but also the rank of connected users, differentiating between administrators, moderators, registered users and guest accounts. Moderators and administrators are easily recognizable in the list and chat by the display color of their names. Their visibility could affect how other users behave in the chat, which I elaborate on in chapter 6.



Figure 4. *SouthPark’s* custom theme emphasizes the media player and positions the chat interface on the right side of the screen. Note also the use of emotes – images – in the chat. Screenshot made on 20 December 2016 18:48.

Although *SouthPark’s* interface contains the same elements present in the other channels, the channel’s administrator wrote a custom theme for it, making it appear differently than the other channels. As figure 4 shows, *SouthPark’s* interface centrally positions the media player, emphasizing it. The option to hide the media player, which is also available from the layout menu, is highlighted in *Vidya4Chan’s* interface. In contrast, *SouthPark’s* interface forefronts the option to hide the chat. By drawing attention to different parts of the interface, the interface design of these two channels promotes different modes of interaction.

Cytu.be provides a polling tool channel administrators and moderators can use to gauge their users’ opinion. Polls will appear embedded beneath the chat interface. According to cytu.be’s user guidelines, “Each IP address can only vote once, and your vote is cleared when you leave the page.”<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Müller, “Spaces of Participation: Interfaces, Conventions, Routines.”

<sup>45</sup> Montgomery, 5 March 2014, “Cytu.be 3.0 User Guide.”

Polls can be used to allow regular users a limited degree of influence over channel administration. However, *Vidya4Chan* is the only channel in this research corpus where polls are utilized in this manner. Often, they are used to ask users about issues regarding video playback, for example requesting a playlist shuffle. The tool has also been used to consult users on whether temporary bans should be made to recognize IP addresses instead of just usernames.

Before being viewed videos are added to a channel's playlist. Interface design locates the playlist directly under the media player. In *FilmClub*, movies from a media list are streamed through a continuous livestream, this livestream being the only item in the list. In *SouthPark*, the playlist is locked and can't be viewed. In *Vidya4Chan*, everyone can view the playlist and add videos. As shown in figure 5, this results in a playlist compiled by several users at once.



Figure 5. *Vidya4Chan* playlist showing the first five videos, displaying video title, user name and screentime. Hovering over a title also shows how long until its expected airtime. Screenshot made on 28 December 2016, 12:53.

Because *Vidya4Chan*'s interface design allows any user to add videos to the channel's playlist, users in this channel have more freedom to directly influence content selection than in the other two channels. "Voteskipping" grants a limited extent of control over video playback to users. In *FilmClub*, the skip-button is disabled, taking this measure of control away. Polls can also provide an opportunity to participate, but similar to "voteskipping," this opportunity is highly controlled as users can only vote, and do not have the capacity to decide what questions are being asked. Moreover, unlike the skip-button, channel administrators are not obligated to execute decisions reached through a poll.

Commenting on how content is organized and presented on YouTube, Müller notes how the platform draws from conventions associated with commercial broadcasting to shape its space of participation.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, *synchtube*'s construction of channels and their ranking based on popularity echoes both broadcasting television's way of structuring content and YouTube's redefinition of this practice. Moreover, the name cytu.be is an unmistakable reference toward YouTube. Not only does Cytu.be's interface design afford certain interactions and thusly format a framework for participation, it also inspires and facilitates practices. Vice versa, cytu.be's interface is interrelated with social conventions in the way that it was designed to afford certain modes of interactions made conventional by institutionalized streaming websites. The next chapter investigates Cytu.be's rules and conventions in more detail.

<sup>46</sup> Müller, "Spaces of Participation: Interfaces, Conventions, Routines."

## 5. Rules and conventions as a formatting factor

Where interface design can open up spaces of participation by allowing certain types of interaction, cytu.be's rules further structure these spaces by determining what interactions are legal. Routinized practices play as much a part in shaping spaces of participation as structured rules and guidelines. According to Müller the term formatting "indicates a characteristic tension between the predefinition by conceptual structures and the redefinition by practices."<sup>47</sup> In this chapter, I show how pre-structured spaces of participation are further shaped by social conventions. Firstly, I discuss cytu.be's general rules. Subsequently, channel-specific rules and conventions will be considered. As in the previous chapter, channels will be discussed alongside each other to allow for comparison.

A link to cytu.be's user agreement states that "all content and activity on this website must comply with United States law, and where applicable, local laws."<sup>48</sup> By requesting users not do anything illegal on the site, the user agreement enforces the legal boundaries on cytu.be's spaces of participation. However, it remains a question whether some of the content shared in cytu.be's channels is not conflicting with copyright laws. Besides legal claims, the user agreement lists a set of general rules, requesting users to conform to what the researcher considers to be common internet norms; prohibiting spamming, bullying and exploiting or misrepresenting the website.

*Vidya4Chan* features the most elaborate set of rules found in this corpus. Additionally to the set of rules at the top of the channel's page, guidelines can be found in the channel's 8chan message board. *Vidya4Chan*'s rules provide guidelines for moderating and playlist management and also prohibit certain types of content, such as explicit gore; child pornography (also ruled out by cytu.be's user agreement); videos related to the My Little Pony or Furry fandoms; and non-moving videos. The rules warn users against spamming, disrupting the chat and rallying others to skip a video, which can result in them being kicked (temporarily removed) or banned (permanently removed) from the channel. Furthermore, "users can only have up to 15 videos in the playlist in order to prevent walls"<sup>49</sup> and underage users are not allowed. This set of rules constructs an image of what is desirable behavior in *Vidya4Chan*'s chat box and what types of content can be considered acceptable, thus formatting its space of participation.

In comparison, the other two channels both feature only one written rule. *SouthPark*'s disallows any advertising in the room, threatening a permanent ban. Fitting to *FilmClub*'s movie club image, "the one and only rule"<sup>50</sup> is to not post any spoilers about a film's plot. As the previous chapter has shown, compared to the other two channels *Vidya4Chan*'s interface allows users a wider space of participation in which more types of interaction are afforded. *Vidya4Chan*'s relatively wide space of participation is being regulated by a variety of rules to further structure the interactions allowed by its

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<sup>47</sup> Müller, "Spaces of Participation: Interfaces, Conventions, Routines," 4.

<sup>48</sup> "Cytu.be user agreement," accessed 28 December 2016, <https://cytu.be/useragreement>.

<sup>49</sup> "Rules/Report thread," opening post by Bronard (10 September 2016), accessed 19 January 2017, <https://8ch.net/v4c/res/238>.

<sup>50</sup> As written at the top of *FilmClub*'s channel interface, <https://cytu.be/r/filmclub>.

interface. An analysis of the routinized practices in this chapter shows that *Vidya4Chan* also knows more practices than the other two channels.

“Emote trains” exemplify how routinized user interactions can shape a space of participation. This practice, specific to *Vidya4Chan*, occurs when multiple users rapidly post identical or related

emotes, clogging the chat box with images, as shown in figure 6. Although cytu.be’s interface affords the use of emotes in the chat box, it does not promote “emote trains.” Instead, they are ingrained it into *Vidya4Chan*’s space of participation through repetitive use. “Emote trains” are linked to the video content being played, requiring users to select appropriate images. Some emotes originate from 4chan’s extensive meme culture, whereas others are channel-specific. Users who are familiar with the associated meaning of popular emotes and have



memorized their reference codes will be able to react more quickly to a video. It appears that at least some users value this skill, as there is original content created specifically to test users’ ability to rapidly switch between posting different emotes. Connecting knowledge and the correct use of memes in 4chan.net to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, Nissenbaum and Shifman note how ““meme literacy” influences users’ status in online communities and indicates membership.”<sup>51</sup> I suggest that the use of emotes in *Vidya4Chan* can be interpreted in a similar way; considering the various uses of emotes in *Vidya4Chan*, and how inappropriate use can be punished by a ban (as this can be interpreted as spamming or disrupting the chat).

Videos played in *Vidya4Chan* are typically under five minutes long. They can be labeled as “snippets,” a form Van Dijck describes as video content “ranging from several seconds to ten minutes, ... meant for recycling in addition to storing, collecting and sharing, ... posted on video-sharing sites to be reused, reproduced, commented upon, or tinkered with.”<sup>52</sup> Snippets can be user-generated content, but more often than not consist of user-copied content.<sup>53</sup> Although the channel hosts an annual original content creation contest, the bulk of videos in *Vidya4Chan* consists of videos curated from other corners of the internet by the channel’s users. The subject matter of these clips varies, with video game, anime, documentary, home video, and music video content setting the canon. Similar to how the appropriate use of emotes can be interpreted as socially constructed, opinions on what is “good” content in *Vidya4Chan* are also structured by group ideals within a social hierarchy. New users

<sup>51</sup> Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman, “Internet memes as contested cultural capital: The case of 4chan’s /b/ board,” *New Media and Society* (2015): 1-19, doi: 10.1177/1461444815609313.

<sup>52</sup> Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 118-119.

<sup>53</sup> Y. Ding et al., “Broadcast yourself: Understanding YouTube uploaders,” paper read at *Internet Measurement Conference* (Berlin, 2-4 November 2011), <http://conferences.sigcomm.org/imc/2011/docs/p361.pdf>.

learn what content “belongs” by looking at the examples and reactions of others, and an incomplete sense of appreciation will likely discourage them from sharing videos in *Vidya4Chan*. Another way how notions of “good content” can be enforced is through “bumping.” When a channel moderator or administrator moves a video to the top of the playlist, they “bump” that content. *Vidya4Chan*’s rules regarding bumps state that “video games are bumped to 1,” and “everything else is bumped to 5 (No music video bumps, however).”<sup>54</sup> Not only do rules biased regarding certain types of content affect the bump policies for that content, they also set the tone for a conventional disposition. In other words, by inscribing a favoritism of video game content over music videos at the top of the page, these rules encourage users to view these types of content accordingly.

The other two channels in this research corpus are more straightforward than *Vidya4Chan* in constructing ideas about what can be considered appropriate content. Named after and themed around the popular animated series, *SouthPark* streams strictly SOUTH PARK episodes in chronological order. Considering the series’ popularity<sup>55</sup> and the highly themed niche character of the channel, it is my expectation that *SouthPark* caters to fans who have already seen most episodes at least once and visit the channel primarily to re-watch. *FilmClub* is dedicated to the screening of movie content, specifically “horror/sci-fi/gore/cult/80s/weird films”<sup>56</sup> in its title. Movies are played randomly from a media list consisting of over 750 films.<sup>57</sup> *FilmClub*’s cult movie club image is further constructed by its discussion thread on 8chan, which promotes the channel as a place with “just movies,” no mainstream content, safe spaces or democracy, “because democracy doesn't work.”<sup>58</sup>

This analysis has shown that there is indeed no question of participatory processes in *Filmclub*. Still, it has been worthwhile to investigate the channel’s frameworks as they provide one extreme form of non-participation in comparison to the other two channels. *SouthPark*’s space of participation, although highly controlled, does provide the option to skip episodes. When viewed in the context of the channel’s visitors being fans familiar with the content, “skipvoting” provides users with a means to skip the less popular episodes from playback. *Vidya4Chan*’s space of participation is the most extensive and complexly formatted found in this corpus. Participatory processes include sharing content, determining the order of playback and collaborating in “emote trains.” This chapter has discussed cytu.be’s user agreement, the channel’s rules and conventions and socially constructed notions of taste as factors structuring *Vidya4Chan*’s space of participation. The next chapter discusses how additionally to those factors set in place by the channel’s properties, differences between user groups further structure participation in *Vidya4Chan*.

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<sup>54</sup> Vidya4Chan, <https://cytu.be/r/v4c>. Rules are posted at the top of the page.

<sup>55</sup> The series’ 20<sup>th</sup> season premiere last year was considered to be a big success. “South Park statistics” (September 6, 2016), accessed on 25 January 2016, <http://www.statisticbrain.com/south-park-statistics>.

<sup>56</sup> As described in the channel’s title on cytu.be’s home page.

<sup>57</sup> According to the description in the channel’s advertising on 8ch.net: “STRIZZZZZLE,” opening post by filmclub (15 January 2017), ID No.6627664, accessed on 19 December 2016, <https://8ch.net/b/res/6627664.html>. The movie list is available through a link in the channel’s interface.

<sup>58</sup> “STRIZZZZZLE,” opening post by filmclub (15 January 2017).

## 6. Constructing power balances in *synchtube*: Who decides what?

The previous two chapters have explored how interface design, rules and social conventions format cytu.be's space of participation. As Müller remarks, "the social power to construct such spaces and to define the frameworks for action is not shared equally within a society."<sup>59</sup> We have already seen some glimpses of the capacities and privileges granted to moderators. This chapter further explores the relations between regular users, moderators and administrators and questions how these affect the construction of participation in cytu.be. Besides looking to cytu.be's channels and user guide, I examine how *Vidya4Chan*'s users speak about responsibilities, rule enforcement, abuse of power and migrating between user groups in five discussion threads on the channel's 8chan.net discussion board. It is worth noting that, although a significant part of the posts embrace 4chan's anonymity and profanity,<sup>60</sup> the board still produces functional discussions.

The controls available to moderators include managing the playlist, making polls, temporarily kicking and permanently banning users from the channel and viewing the channel's log. According to cytu.be's user guide, "channel admins have additional permissions such as promoting users to moderators and editing certain channel settings"<sup>61</sup> As of writing, *Vidya4Chan* has three administrators and over thirty moderators. In comparison, *FilmClub* and *SouthPark* both have only one active administrator. This gap might be explained if we look at the channels' differences in terms of activity and opportunities to participate. In *Vidya4Chan*, there are generally more users, who have more possibilities to participate and more rules to follow or break. This calls for more intense moderation than would be necessary in the other two channels.

The channel's rules shape a moderator's space of participation as well as a regular user's by formulating what actions are illegal and should be moderated. On *Vidya4Chan*'s 8chan messaging board, users describe a moderator's responsibilities as ensuring that the channel operates smoothly. This includes removing inappropriate videos and addressing and possibly banning disruptive users. Furthermore, users state that moderators should be active and responsive.<sup>62</sup> Moderating the chat and playlist gives moderators the possibility to enforce or undermine a space of participation already structured by guidelines. For example, a video containing non-moving images was deleted during playback, discouraging users to break the "no static videos" rule. On the other hand, when rule breakers are not addressed or moderators do not follow a rule themselves (as has been reported to *Vidya4Chan*'s "rules/report thread" six times since September 2016), they set an example, thus shaping the space of participation for those who witness this behavior. In her analysis of

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<sup>59</sup> Müller, "Spaces of Participation: Interfaces, Conventions, Routines," 5.

<sup>60</sup> Whitney Philips provides an extensive description of 4chan's troll culture in *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2015).

<sup>61</sup> Montgomery, 5 March 2014, "Cytu.be 3.0 User Guide."

<sup>62</sup> The themes "moderators should ensure the channel operates smoothly," "it is important for moderators to be active," "moderators should reply to private messages" were found to be recurrent in the analysed threads. See Appendix A for a list of the codes for each theme.

communication in an online community, Lori Kendall attests to moderators' influence, stating that "moderators' words ... carry more weight, and serve to educate newcomers into group norms."<sup>63</sup>

Figure 9 provides a schematic overview of moderators as regulatory entities in cytu.be.

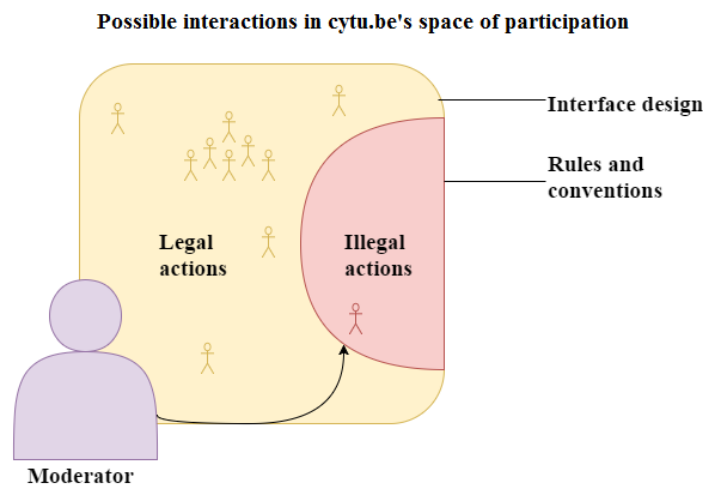


Figure 9. Moderators' actions affect a framework for participation which has already been set in place by interface design and rules and conventions.

A final regulative measure at moderators' disposal is to permanently remove a user from their channel. Through banning and unbanning moderators and administrators function as gatekeepers to *synchtube*'s channels. To be unbanned, users have to apply to the "unban thread," stating the reason. In this discussion thread, there are seven reasons stated for getting banned. There are users who have been banned by breaking the channel's rules – some of them deliberately, some of them new users who haven't read or not realizing the extent of the rules. There are also unban requests by users who were banned for insulting or criticizing a moderator or administrator. According to a moderator's post in the "rules/report thread," the length of a ban is at a moderator's discretion.<sup>64</sup> However, the same moderator also writes:

I have been trying to get other mods to visit the unban/other 8chan threads if and when they ban someone because shit like this happens and we have users that sit in the banlist forever long after their disciplinary cycle was up and were just forgotten about.<sup>65</sup>

Indicating that a ban can only be lifted manually, and that there are some guidelines to how long a ban should last. Whereas some rules, such as those regarding content, are relatively straightforward, others can be open for interpretation. Since "emotes trains" are a conventional part of *Vidya4Chan* it can be challenging to users to estimate when they are disrupting the chat. A fair amount of users in the "unban thread" (10) writes to have not understood the reason for their ban. User Lelium expresses his

<sup>63</sup> Lori Kendall, "'Noobs' and 'chicks' on Animation Portal: power and status in a community of practice" *International Journal of Web Based Communities* 4:4 (2008), 497.

<sup>64</sup> HotSause!ljCVXfxZDg (10 December 2016, post ID cfe485 No.1317), in reply to "rules/Report thread," opening post by Bronard (10 September 2016).

<sup>65</sup> HotSause!ljCVXfxZDg (10 December 2016, post ID c a97015 No.1322), in reply to "Unban thread," opening post by Bronard (10 September 2016), accessed 19 January 2017, <https://8ch.net/v4c/res/239.html>.



frustration, requesting “written and objective rules instead of subjective moderation.”<sup>66</sup> Not only do moderators wield the power to deny users complete access from *Vidya4Chan*, they also seem to be able to freely interpret when it is justified to wield this power. Users can appeal, and although a number of appeals (17) have resulted in being unbanned, there is no guarantee that their unban request will be read. Not only do moderators belong to a privileged group, they are also in the capacity to use their privileges to control other users.

There are several posts concerning moderators keeping favorites (6), “bumping” their own content too much (4) and abusing the option to kick or ban users from the channel.<sup>67</sup> Administrators have the capacity to grant users moderator status and also to “demod” them, stripping them from of this status. According to Bronard, one of *Vidya4Chan*’s administrators, “random bans will result in a not-so-random demod.”<sup>68</sup> Although administrators can choose to listen to counsel offered by moderators and “whitenames” on who should be a moderator and who not, they are also free to ignore these advices – placing administrators in another gatekeeper position. The discussion thread “make me a mod again” was started by once-moderator 141 Shako to request a “remod.” 141 Shako states that there are no moderators who deal with rule-breakers at late hours,<sup>69</sup> and expresses his dissatisfaction with the moderators who are usually online during those times. This sparks a discussion on what makes a good moderator, to which several regular users and moderators reply. Moderator Prototype comments:

Make it look like you deserve remod for your current actions. If you show up out of nowhere after a long hiatus and become mod because of stuff you did almost a year ago many will be suspicious of the admins picking favorites again. .... Couldn't agree more that we can always use more mods, I dream of a v4c where everyone is reliable enough to be blue. Remods are trickier than newmods however because ex-mods have proven themselves unable to be reliable 100% of the time while newmods still have the benefit of the doubt.<sup>70</sup>

Suggesting that moderator status is at once something which should be earned, can only be granted to capable users. Other replies to the same thread appear to consider “moderatorship” to be more like a job, and less like an honorary title, arguing that it should only be granted to those who actually moderate the channel. Interestingly, Prototype refers to “a v4c where everyone would be reliable enough to be blue,”<sup>71</sup> raising questions of equality. Although granting moderator powers to all regular users would certainly democratize existing power relations in *Vidya4Chan* – and surely also result in a lot of mayhem – it would not result in a maximized form of participation because firstly, there would still be administrators and secondly, there would still be differences between experienced users and newcomers that cannot be effaced through changes in the interface. As I have shown in the previous

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<sup>66</sup> Lelium (4 October 2016, post ID 5d0b65 No.520), in reply to “rules/Report thread,” opening post by Bronard (10 September 2016).

<sup>67</sup> Kick and ban abuse has been reported with visual evidence three times since the “rules/report thread” was opened.

<sup>68</sup> “Rules/Report thread,” opening post by Bronard (10 September 2016).

<sup>69</sup> “Late hours” meaning late evening or nighttime in American time zones.

<sup>70</sup> Prototype (17 November 2016, post ID), in reply to “make me a mod again,” opening post by 141 Shako (16 November 2016), accessed 20 January 2017, <https://8ch.net/v4c/res/1022.html>.

<sup>71</sup> *Idem*.



chapter, experienced users who are well-versed in the ways of the *Vidya4Chan* community are likely to possess more cultural capital, resulting in status and influence.

Whereas moderators can risk being demodded if they abuse their power or not fulfill their responsibilities, administrators possess a higher level of autonomy. On 31 January 2016, Bronard deleted a large amount of the channel's emotes without notice. This event, called the emote purge by users, resulted in much confusion and angry reactions in the channel and on the board. To appeal to the complaints, Bronard restored most of the emotes the day after. A couple days later, Bronard addresses his action in the "rules/report thread," explaining that the purge was planned, but not communicated properly. The idea was to purge most emotes, and then ask users which ones they wanted back.<sup>72</sup> Users criticize how the chain of events unfolded, commenting how it gives a "false sense of choice"<sup>73</sup> and "accomplishes nothing for no one except pretending you did something "good" and allowed us "democracy""<sup>74</sup> The emote purge crisis reveals two interesting insights about power relations between users in *Vidya4Chan*. Firstly, that although users were granted a voice in the matter, it was Bronard in his capacity as an administrator who decides how and when users will be able to communicate which emotes they want to keep. Secondly, that when Bronard's plan was badly executed, users engaged in an open discussion on the matter, demanding an explanation and also suggesting better ways to decide what emotes to delete. I would suggest that these kinds of discussions, in which users engage and question matters of common interest to the community, form the heart of participation in *Vidya4Chan*.

## 7. Conclusion

This research has aimed to map the construction of participation in an underground video-sharing platform and to address the role of power relations between users in this process. I have shown how participation is layered, structured by multiple interlocking factors. Utilizing Müller's framework of formatted spaces of participation, I formed a model of analysis consisting of three major structuring factors. The triple focus on interface design, rules and conventions and power relations has helped to uncover the layered nature of the construction of participation in *synchtube*, where the interplay between interface design and social conventions gives rise to a framework for participation, which is in turn shaped and restructured through the actions of users. These actions can vary from the performance of routinized practices to questioning the very terms of participation itself.

The greatest strength of formatted spaces of participation also constitutes its weakness. Its focus on specific instances of participatory culture does not allow for greater contextualization.

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<sup>72</sup> Bronard (3 January 2017, post ID ce596a No.1667), in reply to "rules/Report thread," opening post by Bronard (10 September 2016).

<sup>73</sup> Arcade!chan (2 January 2017, post ID 0026f4 No.1617), in reply to "rules/Report thread," opening post by Bronard (10 September 2016).

<sup>74</sup> Gavin (2 January 2017, post ID 5ecb14 No.1609), in reply to "rules/Report thread," opening post by Bronard (10 September 2016).

However, the framework is adaptable and not impossible to combine with other concepts and methods, as I have shown in chapters 5 and 6. This analysis might have been able to benefit from a theorized scale to assess the uncovered forms of participation with, augmenting the discussion and relative comparison of three different channels in cytu.be.

Interestingly, the construction of participation in the three different channels of this corpus differs significantly, showing that participation can be both static and fluid. Where highly controlled forms of pseudo-participation such as the use of “skipvoting” in *SouthPark* do not allow users enough space to mutate the practice, participation is rigid. In *Vidya4Chan*, interface design affords several possibly participatory types of interaction, which are further shaped and structured by its users through practices and the socially constructed perceptions of these practices. The institutionalization of an off-site message board as a site for discussion offers users to discuss and criticize the frameworks for participation and to address power inequalities between regular users, moderators and administrators, making the first steps towards more democratized forms of participation.

As I have argued, the research field concerning participatory culture has mainly been focused on big commercial platforms and formats, seeking to destabilize utopian business discourses glorifying new media’s participatory potential. In my opinion, the research field has adequately addressed these matters. Scholars such as van Dijck and Andrejevic have provided valuable insights into political economy’s machinations to construct profitable yet standardized and easy to control forms of participatory culture.<sup>75,76</sup> Critical analyses of the strategies deployed by new media industries are still very much relevant, as these strategies touch the lives of millions of citizens. However, extensive research of commercial new media platforms has shown that there is little promise for more maximized forms of participation in this corner. Scholars such as Jenkins and Carpentier argue for the importance of more democratized forms of media engagement as the main characteristic of participatory culture.<sup>77 78</sup> I argue for the research of smaller, alternative new media platforms and communities as instances of participatory culture. Expanding the research field and taking off the horse’s blinkers could in time contribute to a more nuanced and varied scholarly understanding of participatory culture.

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<sup>75</sup> Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity. A Critical History of Social Media*.

<sup>76</sup> Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*.

<sup>77</sup> Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. (New York: NYU Press, 2013).

<sup>78</sup> Jenkins and Carpentier, “Theorizing participatory intensities: A conversation about participation and politics.”

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## **Appendix A: Relevant themes apparent in five threads in *Vidya4Chan*'s discussion board**

The following themes are the result of a question-driven analysis of the discussion threads “unban thread,”<sup>79</sup> “rules/report thread,”<sup>80</sup> “make me a mod again,”<sup>81</sup> “suggestions”<sup>82</sup> and “mod eval discussion thread”<sup>83</sup> on *Vidya4Chan*'s 8chan discussion board. This analysis aims to help answer how power imbalances between regular users, moderators and administrators contribute to the construction of participation in Cytu.be. Topics of interest for analysis were moderators' responsibilities; banned users; reasons for being banned; the unbanning process; reasons to be granted or stripped from moderator status; abuse of power; and statements reflecting on these processes.

All relevant codes were selected from each discussion and sorted into themes. Taking the informal character of the board into account, and seeing as some users have the tendency to make repeated arguments, multiple replies by the same author in the same discussion making the same point have been listed as one code. After the initial analysis, the formulated themes were reviewed. A number of themes were found similar and were merged, forming the themes “being banned for spamming and advertising,” “moderators are guilty of favouritism” and “moderators should ensure the channel operates smoothly.” As a final step, the discussion threads were analysed again with the formulated themes in mind. Doing so yielded four more codes. In total, 140 codes were found and organized into 23 themes.

The final selection of themes is listed below – the numbers between parentheses represent the number of codes that were found for each theme. A complete list of codes, organized by theme and originating discussion thread, can be found on the following pages.

### **Themes**

- Admins and moderators bump their own videos too much (4)
- Being banned for “hurting a mod's feelings” (12)
- Being banned for an inappropriate username (3)
- Being banned for encouraging others to use the skip-button (10)
- Being banned for inappropriate content (6)
- Being banned for language (4)
- Being banned for raising the suspicion of being underage (8)
- Being banned for spamming and advertising (12)

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<sup>79</sup> “Unban thread,” opening post by Bronard (10 September 2016), accessed 19 January 2017, <https://8ch.net/v4c/res/239.html>.

<sup>80</sup> “Rules/Report thread,” opening post by Bronard (10 September 2016), accessed 19 January 2017, <https://8ch.net/v4c/res/238.html>.

<sup>81</sup> “Make me a mod again,” opening post by 141 Shako (16 November 2016), accessed 20 January 2017, <https://8ch.net/v4c/res/1022.html>.

<sup>82</sup> “Suggestions,” opening post by Wharrgarbl (15 January 2017), accessed 20 January 2017, <https://8ch.net/v4c/res/1836.html>.

<sup>83</sup> “Mod eval discussion thread,” opening post by anonymous user (11 October 2016), accessed 21 January 2017, <https://8ch.net/v4c/res/590.html>.

Emotes should be decided on democratically (6)  
It is important for moderators to be active (7)  
Length of ban is at a moderator's discretion (1)  
Moderator evaluations should keep bad moderators in check (2)  
Moderators are guilty of favouritism (6)  
Moderators should ensure the channel operates smoothly (5)  
Moderators should reply to private messages (4)  
Report of moderator breaking the rules (6)  
The rules are not clear (1)  
To be unbanned, users should go through unban thread and state reason (2)  
Unban thread is not effective (2)  
Users should report abuse (3)  
Why did I get banned? (10)  
You will not be unbanned yet, ban was justified (5)  
You're unbanned (17)

### **Themes and codes – “unban thread”**

297 posts resulted in 91 codes sorted into 13 themes.

To be unbanned, users should go through unban thread and state reason

(Bronard 09/10/16 (Sat) 21:20:02 4efc5d No.239)( HotSause!ljCVXfxZDg 12/09/16 (Fri) 07:54:15 a97015 No.1297 “Stating that you were banned is not a basis for getting unbanned.”)

Being banned for inappropriate content

(Lelium 09/12/16 (Mon) 07:02:34 5dfa95 No.272)( Human-Ramen 11/13/16 (Sun) 18:08:13 5d71cc No.992)( Anonymous 10/14/16 (Fri) 12:35:21 a537da No.638)  
(LEGALIZE\_GAYWEED 11/25/16 (Fri) 08:39:17 5e14e3 No.1153)( Garry 12/24/16 (Sat) 21:53:17 0b399d No.1465)( Seriously 12/29/16 (Thu) 23:16:01 2e3286 No.1491)

Being banned for “hurting a mod's feelings”

(babbi 09/27/16 (Tue) 17:36:20 d050ee No.436)( Seriously 11/11/16 (Fri) 02:53:44 4fcf45 No.976)( PingASS 10/20/16 (Thu) 01:12:09 2d4bdb No.682)( bigbirdonfire 11/01/16 (Tue) 03:52:349cacba No.916)( MerryMistress 12/14/16 (Wed) 08:22:05 04bb6c No.1363)  
( Anonymous 12/15/16 (Thu) 05:23:46 1a3338 No.1375)(SeriouslyScrooged 12/20/16 (Tue) 03:42:11 4fcf45 No.1422)( Anonymous 01/02/17 (Mon) 05:58:16 1a3338 No.1607)  
( Anonymous 01/03/17 (Tue) 18:02:24 e47376 No.1672)(Anonymous 01/04/17 (Wed) 17:39:09 a537da No.1693)

Being banned for an inappropriate username

(Anonymous 09/17/16 (Sat) 05:21:26 1a3338 No.308)(presstabstart 12/27/16 (Tue) 03:16:28 f30871 No.1479)( Anonymous 01/05/17 (Thu) 16:21:59 9b0977 No.1697)



#### Being banned for language

(Adolf-Hitler 09/18/16 (Sun) 23:42:09 2c3f0b No.317)( Womyn 11/15/16 (Tue) 19:05:48 Obd371 No.1013)( himself 10/25/16 (Tue) 15:15:34 921666 No.828)( Seriously 11/18/16 (Fri) 05:56:44 4fcf45 No.1074)

#### Being banned for encouraging others to use the skip-button

(Xars 09/25/16 (Sun) 11:08:30 fbc990 No.396)( Icee 10/03/16 (Mon) 02:04:28 d86dfa No.5110)( Lelium 10/04/16 (Tue) 19:01:00 5dfa95 No.519)( Jessman 10/08/16 (Sat) 02:48:05 d90a74 No.527)( HotSause 11/03/16 (Thu) 05:39:49 a97015 No.945 “Mentioning it once is not a big deal, in the eyes of most mods at least. However your spacing between messages suggests you're trying to convey an ulterior motive. You have to remember, this is v4c. Where the memiest 4chan users come to play. If you know anything about the 4chan community; Monkey see, Monkey do. Someone sees skip and everyone clicks it.”)( Buttery 11/23/16 (Wed) 18:38:51 13b7d6 No.1137)( Anonymous 12/09/16 (Fri) 14:02:23 43c988 No.1301)(Anonymous 12/16/16 (Fri) 10:44:40 d24487 No.1390)( Anonymous 12/17/16 (Sat) 23:26:59 43c988 No.1407)( Anonymous 01/01/17 (Sun) 23:06:42 40d7e9 No.1573)

#### Being banned for spamming and advertising

(bonesaw667 11/04/16 (Fri) 22:34:13 172a3b No.963)(Human-Ramen 11/13/16 (Sun) 18:08:13 5d71cc No.992)( Anonymous 10/24/16 (Mon) 01:13:50 042939 No.779)( Ectotyke 10/25/16 (Tue) 22:40:04 9508af No.838)( Anonymous 11/28/16 (Mon) 04:56:11 d57526 No.1167)( HotSause!ljCVXfxZDg 12/01/16 (Thu) 19:05:33 a97015 No.1195 “This goes out to all of the "helper" posters, and to anyone else who spams an emote into every message they make. You were abusing an emote, in the same way posting irrelevant /gub is also illegal. Maybe everyone should read the rules again.”)( KlausKino 12/01/16 (Thu) 20:02:49 4d7cd7 No.1204)( Kykinson 12/01/16 (Thu) 19:11:18 95ba54 No.1196)( rdibp 12/04/16 (Sun) 02:10:14 445500 No.1227)( Gubble 12/08/16 (Thu) 05:23:57 d940f0 No.1283)( cheer10alt 12/14/16 (Wed) 06:59:34 a0df1d No.1358)( Anonymous 12/14/16 (Wed) 13:20:25 299cd1 No.1367)( littlebro 01/07/17 (Sat) 00:50:05 f48430 No.1706)

#### Being banned for raising the suspicion of being underage

(Anonymous 10/28/16 (Fri) 06:26:19 ff7b5c No.899)( HotSause 11/01/16 (Tue) 16:10:06 a97015 No.921 “We dont take the underage rule lightly. You'll have to prove it somehow”)( Anonymous 11/18/16 (Fri) 20:57:10 081a43 No.1084)( Rookie 12/10/16 (Sat) 14:56:45 79f497 No.1332)( Freeps 12/27/16 (Tue) 04:06:19 bc2800 No.1480)( presstabstart 12/27/16 (Tue) 03:16:28 f30871 No.1479)( xerafaggot 12/27/16 (Tue) 05:20:17 7bb273 No.1481)( Anonymous 01/07/17 (Sat) 18:50:04 79f497 No.1780)( hunter2 01/15/17 (Sun) 21:33:21 997123 No.1837)

#### Moderators are guilty of favouritism

(Seriously 11/18/16 (Fri) 21:05:47 4fcf45 No.1085)

#### Unban thread is not effective

(HotSause!ljCVXfxZDg 12/10/16 (Sat) 09:10:38 a97015 No.1322 “I have been trying to get other mods to visit the unban/other 8chan threads if and when they ban someone because shit like this happens and we have users that sit in the banlist forever long after their disciplinary cycle was up and were just forgotten about”)

You're unbanned

(HotSause!ljCVXfxZDg 11/16/16 (Wed) 17:43:46 a97015 No.1027)( Monokuma 11/17/16 (Thu) 18:56:15 aebc2a No.1049)( Svergy 11/13/16 (Sun) 23:54:12 e5d114 No.997)( Anonymous 10/22/16 (Sat) 21:35:22 ff7b5c No.725)( Anonymous 10/24/16 (Mon) 01:37:11 ff7b5c No.780)( Svergy 10/26/16 (Wed) 19:10:43 5ebca2 No.873)( Marukyu 11/19/16 (Sat) 01:05:18 5a7ad9 No.1097)( HotSause!ljCVXfxZDg 12/01/16 (Thu) 19:49:37 a97015 No.1201)(HotSause!ljCVXfxZDg 12/06/16 (Tue) 05:42:50 a97015 No.1264)( Svergy 12/09/16 (Fri) 16:03:03 e5d114 No.1305)( HotSause!ljCVXfxZDg 12/11/16 (Sun) 05:08:46 a97015 No.1339)( sym 12/16/16 (Fri) 14:59:25 86e689 No.13940)( Marukyu 12/22/16 (Thu) 21:45:06 5a7ad9 No.1441)(Twatisucc 12/16/16 (Fri) 12:22:23 86e689 No.1393)( Bronard 12/19/16 (Mon) 22:29:04 06dee3 No.1420)( Marukyu 01/03/17 (Tue) 05:16:56 5a7ad9 No.1664)( Marukyu 01/08/17 (Sun) 23:57:12 5a7ad9 No.1796)

You will not be unbanned yet, ban was justified

(vodkadothka 10/12/16 (Wed) 23:11:11 b78383 No.607)(Anonymous 10/22/16 (Sat) 21:35:22 ff7b5c No.725) (HotSause!ljCVXfxZDg 12/09/16 (Fri) 17:21:09 a97015 No.1306 “You can stay banned another day for lying.”)( hunter2 12/24/16 (Sat) 22:00:24 2a456c No.1466)

Why did I get banned?

(Addest 09/22/16 (Thu) 12:01:26 006098 No.365)( Anonymous 11/12/16 (Sat) 04:03:52 fe465f No.985)( Xars 11/12/16 (Sat) 19:04:22 fbc990 No.988)( Anonymous 11/13/16 (Sun) 04:28:51 03685f No.991)( Anonymous 11/14/16 (Mon) 00:14:09 3129b0 No.998)( Buttery 11/01/16 (Tue) 08:52:07 8a2ad5 No.917)( Band-Aid 12/01/16 (Thu) 02:53:40 47831d No.1189)(bluetoothdad 12/06/16 (Tue) 18:09:36 50f59c No.1270)( SickDauce 12/10/16 (Sat) 09:57:35 530ebb No.1328)( JustObservin 01/09/17 (Mon) 20:20:22 e1ebd5 No.1799)

### **Themes and codes – “rules/report thread”**

127 posts resulted in 22 codes sorted into 9 themes.

Being banned for “hurting a mod’s feelings”

(Anonymous 09/11/16 (Sun) 04:09:51 96e802 No.255)(Anonymous 10/08/16 (Sat) 12:09:19 c93993 No.529)( concerned v4c user 01/07/17 (Sat) 21:24:49 a3c551 No.1785)

Emotes should be decided on democratically

(Arcade!chan9hXtvI 01/02/17 (Mon) 11:06:40 0026f4 No.1617 “if admins are going to decide the emotes in the end, then don't beat around the bush and give a false sense of choice by asking people for what they want back. Just go add the emotes yourself and be done with it.”)( bobsled 01/03/17 (Tue) 01:05:21 90c397 No.1651)( Bronard!5vxZSjZKP6 01/03/17 (Tue) 07:06:29 ce596a No.1667)( Lelium!rlkyiB1vAs 01/01/17 (Sun) 20:46:52 5d0b65 No.1557)( Gavin!!ZEpOzYjGRk 01/02/17 (Mon) 07:00:26 5ecb14 No.1609)

Length of ban is at a moderator’s discretion

(HotSause!ljCVXfxZDg 12/10/16 (Sat) 08:32:34 cfe485 No.1317)

Moderators are guilty of favouritism

(Anonymous 10/02/16 (Sun) 01:23:30 65a761 No.501)( Trucidare 11/20/16 (Sun) 03:33:44 1a1cd6 No.1123)(Anonymous 10/05/16 (Wed) 02:44:41 8ce549 No.522)

Report of moderator breaking the rules

(Anonymous 09/20/16 (Tue) 15:12:35 70dd82 No.335)( Anonymous 09/23/16 (Fri) 20:40:28 1a1cf1 No.376)( Anonymous 11/02/16 (Wed) 03:38:58 c32886 No.929)( Lelium 11/19/16 (Sat) 18:58:03 5d0b65 No.1115)( Pandaura 12/27/16 (Tue) 17:04:45 3fc6f5 No.1483) ( Anonymous 12/29/16 (Thu) 22:18:31 53ff79 No.1490)

The rules are not clear

(Lelium 10/04/16 (Tue) 19:54:44 5d0b65 No.520 “Give us written and objective rules instead of subjective moderation. Otherwise we are simply at the mercy of how a mod feels about an issue.”)

Users should report abuse

(Bronard 09/10/16 (Sat) 21:17:15 ce596a No.238)( Anonymous 12/05/16 (Mon) 19:25:18 28c11d No.1257)

You will not be unbanned yet, ban was justified

(HotSause!ljCVXfxZDg 12/10/16 (Sat) 08:22:34 cfe485 No.1315)

### **Themes and codes – “make me a mod again”**

31 posts resulted in 19 codes sorted into 7 themes.

Admins and moderators bump their own videos too much

(141shako 11/16/16 (Wed) 10:32:05 bb5c21 No.1022)( Rookie 11/16/16 (Wed) 18:07:41 8d0a20 No.1028)

It is important for moderators to be active

(141shako 11/16/16 (Wed) 10:32:05 bb5c21 No.1022)( Anonymous 11/17/16 (Thu) 13:00:39 639ba5 No.1048)( Monokuma 11/17/16 (Thu) 19:48:00 2b391a No.1050)( Anonymous 11/19/16 (Sat) 13:51:43 639ba5 No.1113)( Marukyu 11/20/16 (Sun) 00:23:18 8dd4d0 No.1117)( itscocc 11/20/16 (Sun) 21:13:52 87e18f No.1128)

Moderator evaluations should keep bad moderators in check

(141shako 11/16/16 (Wed) 22:47:33 bb5c21 No.1030)( Prototype 11/16/16 (Wed) 13:16:13 12b41f No.1026)

Moderators are guilty of favouritism

(141shako 11/16/16 (Wed) 10:32:05 bb5c21 No.1022)( Monokuma 11/17/16 (Thu) 19:48:00 2b391a No.1050 “While I agree that favouritism exists, it's normal for any social community”)

Moderators should ensure the channel operates smoothly

(141shako 11/16/16 (Wed) 10:32:05 bb5c21 No.1022)( Prototype 11/17/16 (Thu) 01:40:38 12b41f No.1034)( Monokuma 11/17/16 (Thu) 19:48:00 2b391a No.1050)( himself 11/19/16 (Sat) 09:09:58 7b2f48 No.1106)

Moderators should reply to private messages

(141shako 11/17/16 (Thu) 02:35:52 bb5c21 No.1036)( Prototype 11/16/16 (Wed) 13:16:13 12b41f No.1026)

Users should report abuse  
(Prototype 11/16/16 (Wed) 13:16:13 12b41f No.1026)

**Themes and codes – “suggestions”**

67 posts resulted in 6 codes sorted into 6 themes.

Admins and moderators bump their own videos too much  
(Scivir 01/15/17 (Sun) 21:54:52 322566 No.1849)

Emotes should be decided on democratically  
(Anonymous 01/15/17 (Sun) 22:49:36 779ece No.1871)

It is important for moderators to be active  
(Anonymous 01/15/17 (Sun) 22:54:59 3cf691 No.1872)

Moderators should ensure the channel operates smoothly  
(JustAWhitename 01/16/17 (Mon) 19:10:43 4dc7c5 No.1907)

Moderators should reply to private messages  
(Anonymous 01/15/17 (Sun) 22:54:59 3cf691 No.1872)

Unban thread is not effective  
(littlebro 01/15/17 (Sun) 21:40:51 7ab376 No.1844)

**Themes and codes – “mod eval discussion thread”**

14 posts resulted into 2 codes sorted into 2 themes.

Admins and moderators bump their own videos too much  
(Anonymous 10/13/16 (Thu) 13:38:08 421b9c No.616)

Moderators should reply to private messages  
(Bronard 10/12/16 (Wed) 15:36:54 9f7480 No.602)