For the girls, gays, and theys: LGBTQ+ stakeholder communication and alignment of video game brands

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Queer identities have predominantly existed at the peripheries of media representation as well as communication research. Linking this research gap with the field of video games as a medium, this study examines video game companies and their strategic communication efforts toward LGBTQ+ stakeholders through critical discourse analysis with influences of queer theory. With this focus, we aim to identify how video game companies discursively construct queer identities and utilize them for strategic communication. Through the analysis of the social media and online discourses surrounding two games with queer inclusion, we show that queer branding has an influence on the way strategic communication efforts are employed throughout the year, as well as the type of content. Furthermore, we show that in our selected cases, organizations can successfully align themselves with their LGBTQ+ stakeholders by having queer inclusion at the core of their strategic communication efforts and authentic organizational practices.

KEYWORDS

strategic communication, LGBTQ+ stakeholder, LGBTQ+ representation, indie games, video game communication

1. Introduction

This study explores how video game companies employ strategic communication to foster LGBTQ+ stakeholder alignment and thereby partake in the creation of public culture and the construction of queer identities (Hallahan et al., 2007; Ciszek, 2018). To do so, we compare and analyze the communication of *Tell Me Why* (DONTNOD Entertainment, 2020) and *Bugsnax* (Young Horses, 2020) on social media, as well as their organizational practices. By analyzing the strategic communication efforts from the companies' social media, and then contrasting that to their corporate social responsibility practices targeting LGBTQ+ stakeholders, we attempt to analyze their perceived authenticity to stakeholders.

Until a few years ago, queer identities existed not only at the peripheries of media production and representation but also on the peripheries of communication researchers and practitioners (Edwards and L'Etang, 2013; Tindall, 2013; Thach, 2021). However, through the hard work of LGBTQ+ individuals, this is slowly changing (Ciszek, 2018). For example, video games have recently been acknowledged as a medium with worthwhile queer representation, with GLAAD[1] introducing the Outstanding Video Game award in 2019 (Harvey, 2019).

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1 GLAAD is an acronym for Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. GLAAD is an American non-governmental media monitoring organization.

Since discourse occurs as a form of social practice, an explanation of the concept of strategic communication, as well as relevant constructs, such as authenticity, public relations, corporate social responsibility, and LGBTQ+ stakeholders, is needed. We also provide an overview of the socioeconomic situation of the LGBTQ+ market and consumer identity to have the necessary basis to deconstruct these discursive practices. Finally, to better contextualize this for video games, the representation of LGBTQ+ identities in the medium is addressed.

2. Theoretical framework

The scholarship surrounding strategic communication has been expanding ever since the inception of the term in 2007. Still, the definition that Hallahan et al. (2007) put forward in their article remains one of the most influential and largely unchallenged. They summarize the essence of strategic communication as an "organization, defined in its broadest sense, communicating purposefully to advance its mission" (p. 4). Other scholars have offered expansions of this definition from 2007 but generally agree that strategic communication is deliberate, purposive, and persuasive by an organization enacted in the public sphere to reach set goals (Holtzhausen et al., 2021).

The term "organization" encompasses not only corporations and for-profit organizations but also non-profit organizations, activist groups, political parties, and (non)government organizations (Hallahan et al., 2007). Seeking to gain admiration, attention, alignment, affinity, and allegiance from their stakeholders (Hallahan et al., 2007), organizations use an array of communication channels for this purpose, including earned, paid, owned, and shared media (Zerfass et al., 2018). Strategic communication is always a two-way process of messaging and listening, meaning it does not only seek to influence but is also influenced by a variety of stakeholders, such as other organizations, consumers, and markets (Zerfass et al., 2018).

Public relations is, of course, one type of strategic communication, and fostering PR can be a balancing act for organizations having to oscillate between different stakeholder groups and their interests. Aligning with the LGBTQ+ community has been of increasing interest to companies (Champlin and Li, 2020). LGBTQ+ issues reflect changes in political, cultural, and economic landscapes; therefore, challenging the communication routine of organizations (Champlin and Li, 2020).

2.1. Public relations with LGBTQ+ stakeholders

In this research, we define public relations as a "flow of purposive communication produced on behalf of individuals, formally constituted and informally constituted groups, through their continuous trans-actions with other social entities" (Edwards, 2012, p. 21). Public relations as a cultural intermediary is "laced with ideological, political, and cultural values and hegemonic, heteronormative assumptions" (Edwards and L'Etang, 2013, p. 42). However, not only are practitioners affected by these values and assumptions but also academics (Tindall, 2013)—with LGBTQ+

perspectives having been "effectively written out of research on public relations" (Edwards and L'Etang, 2013, pp. 50–51).

2.1.1. Corporate social responsibility

Expanding since the mid-20th century, corporate responsibilities evolved beyond simply maximizing financial returns and providing services to consumers. Nowadays they also encompass catering to the expectations of a variety of different stakeholders (Carroll, 1999; Zhou, 2021). Companies include these expectations because perceived corporate social responsibility (CSR) influences the purchase intention and brand perception of consumers (Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006; Wagner et al., 2009).

Various and context-specific definitions of CSR are the result of including stakeholder expectations, though as several scholars highlight, they all built on the same groundwork (e.g., Carroll, 1999; Dahlsrud, 2008). All different definitions point to the same five dimensions: environmental, social, economic, stakeholder, and voluntariness (Dahlsrud, 2008). Hence, advocacy for, and alignment with the LGBTQ+ community, fall within the domain of CSR. LGBTQ+ issues are societal issues, and their solutions sometimes surpass legal obligations. To appeal to and retain LGBTQ+ stakeholders, organizations position themselves as socially responsible through initiatives that also need to be strategically communicated. If stakeholders perceive a divergence between CSR communication and organizational practice, meaning corporations failed to deliver on their promises, it is viewed as corporate hypocrisy (Wagner et al., 2009). Hence, CSR activities can only improve a corporate's image if those activities are perceived to be authentic or sincere (Yoon et al., 2006).

However, genuine commitment to social issues becomes increasingly difficult for corporations that operate transnationally. In an examination of the video game company Blizzard Entertainment, Venter (2021) found that the corporate strategy prioritized national cultural identities over their full commitment to supporting the LGBTQ+ community. These inconsistencies can lead to perceived corporate hypocrisy or inauthenticity, accentuating that "the line between pandering to consumers and social issues and practicing ethical and truly altruistic CSR can sometimes seem rather blurry" (Venter, 2021, p. 60). This is especially due to corporate communication on social media transgressing regional boundaries. Still, the existence of "truly altruistic" CSR can be contested since corporations in a capitalistic market are inherently motivated by financial gain.

2.1.2. Authenticity

When looking at CSR, it becomes clear that a key aspect of successful public relations, particularly with LGBTQ+ stakeholders, is authenticity. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have contributed to the understanding of this construct, highlighting its interdisciplinarity. However, there is no agreement on the definition of authenticity, resulting in a variety of research-specific ones (see Molleda, 2010).

Through strategic public relations, organizations highlight specific aspects to build their corporate personalities. This is in turn analyzed and judged by their stakeholders, with consistency between communication and action resulting in perceived

authenticity among stakeholders (Molleda, 2010). Accordingly, the context of authenticity becomes especially significant for relationships with marginalized stakeholder groups, like LGBTQ+ consumers (Ciszek and Pounders, 2020). Incorporating this aspect, Lim et al. conceptualized a scale of perceived organizational authenticity (POA):

> POA with historically marginalized publics [is] the extent to which stakeholders perceive an [organization] to be faithful toward itself (*continuity*), true to its stakeholders (*credibility*), motivated by caring and responsibility (*integrity*), and able to support stakeholders in being true to themselves (*symbolism*), and representing a diversity of stakeholders and their identities (*representativeness*). (2022, p. 192 emphasis in original)

They surveyed the effect POA has on stakeholder skepticism, brand attitude, and purchase intention. Results indicate that POA positively influences brand attitude and purchase intention. Most importantly, POA helps moderate stakeholders' skepticism toward LGBTQ+ communication, and, in turn, may strengthen the organization–stakeholder relationship. Their findings supported the assertion of Ciszek (2020) that LGBTQ+ stakeholders are highly skeptical of LGBTQ+ communication efforts.

Due to the increased importance of authenticity in LGBTQ+ stakeholder communication, the impact of inauthentic or inconsistent communication and CSR practices can be particularly detrimental to the organization–stakeholder relationship. The demand for authentic communication with LGBTQ+ stakeholders, and holistic support of their community, is not only voiced by queer consumers (e.g., Freitas et al., 1996; Gudelunas, 2011) but also recognized by (queer) strategic communication practitioners (Ciszek and Pounders, 2020; Ciszek and Lim, 2021).

In this research, authenticity means that strategic communication messages are in line with corporate practice. We utilize the POA framework to analyze online discourse surrounding the two video game companies to see if their corporate practices are consistent with their strategic communication efforts on social media. Through this process, we can observe how these companies appear authentic in their alignment with their LGBTQ+ stakeholders.

2.1.3. Rainbow washing

Organizations need to "walk the walk" by confirming their communication with philosophies and policies that are supportive of their LGBTQ+ stakeholders (Ciszek and Pounders, 2020). Marketing strategies that aim to take stances in sociopolitical movements but diverge from the actual organization's practice are summarized under the umbrella term "woke washing" (Vredenburg et al., 2020). When companies co-opt the LGBTQ+ movement for economic reasons, it is classified as rainbow washing (Ciszek, 2018; Champlin and Li, 2020). The term rainbow washing is understood as "any practice that vaguely or misleadingly portrays a company's stance and support for the LGBTQIA* community, leading to (financial) exploitation and deception of customers" (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 2). From this exploration of the term and its origin, it becomes clear that rainbow washing is a form of strategic communication (Ciszek and Pounders, 2020).

Due to the knowledge gap on rainbow washing and its effects (Ciszek, 2018; Johns et al., 2022), scholars build upon findings of other woke washing practices for their research. Johns et al. (2022) assumed that purchase intention would be affected by consumer attitudes toward rainbow washing. None of their hypotheses were supported, interestingly though, they noticed a moderately significant correlation between purchase intention and brand authenticity. If participants felt that the communicated goodwill/CSR of Skittles toward the LGBTQ+ community was genuine, they were more willing to purchase Skittles products (Johns et al., 2022). Wulf et al. (2022) conducted two studies on the effect of vague or concrete support claims on the perceived level of rainbow washing. They found that the perception of rainbow washing had negative effects on brand evaluation, meaning that LGBTQ+ stakeholders are highly skeptical of LGBTQ+ targeted campaigns since they are a historically marginalized public. They demand authentic and holistic organizational support, placing great emphasis on consistent organizational communication throughout the entire year, not just during Pride Month.

Pride Month celebrations in June began to commemorate the violent altercation between police and LGBTQ+ individuals that was known as the Stonewall riots (Library of Congress, 2021). Most organizations tend to "hop on the bandwagon" and release holiday ads with rainbows and queer symbolism, similar to other major holidays (Christmas and Easter). However, given its history and importance to queer culture, it is only natural that the LGBTQ+ community reacts negatively toward corporations commercializing Pride Month. This is truer when organizational practices throughout the year do not align with what they are communicating during Pride Month. Overall, it seems that engaging authentically and consistently with LGBTQ+ stakeholders may result in a mutually beneficial and long-term relationship. To further explore how organizations communicate with this stakeholder group, it is necessary to address the history of the LGBTQ+ community as a market and consumer segment.

2.2. The LGBTQ+ community as a market segment

Exactly when this LGBTQ+ market niche emerged is contested. Before the 1960s, scholars agree that, while queer-owned businesses were serving queer patrons, the concept of a gay market niche "was embryonic at most" (Sender, 2005, p. 25) and remained untargeted by businesses (e.g., Peñaloza, 1996; Branchik, 2002). Following the Stonewall riots in 1969 and the subsequent gay liberation movement, the LGBTQ+ market niche saw increasing visibility among the mainstream media and marketers (Gudelunas, 2013). However, in the beginning, advertisements in mainstream media did not show explicit queer representation and rather relied on gay iconography to covertly target queer consumers (Peñaloza, 1996; Sender, 2005). Importantly, as Sender (2005) notes, (gay) marketers did not only market products to the LGBTQ+ community but also constructed this niche through their marketing activities. Nölke (2018) demonstrates that, while there has been a shift toward more explicit LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream media advertisements, many queer identities remain invisible (e.g.,

trans identities). This bias is also visible in consumer and market research on the LGBTQ+ community (Coffin et al., 2019).

Recognizing the purchasing power of LGBTQ+ customers, companies seek to appeal to and retain these buyers through alignment with their values (Ginder and Sang-Eun, 2015). Research has shown that LGBTQ+ individuals are aware they are being courted for corporate profit, but nonetheless appreciate the gay-friendly attitude of corporations (Tuten, 2005; Gudelunas, 2011). Simultaneously, LGBTQ+ consumers criticize the perpetuated "affluent gay" stereotype and demand genuine support of their community from corporations (Ciszek, 2020; Place et al., 2021). While there are organizations that voice support for the LGBTQ+ movement and engage in supporting prosocial corporate practice, there is also inauthentic organizational communication that merely seeks to capitalize on the LGBTQ+ community and their "queer dollars" (see Ciszek, 2020).

2.3. (In)visibility: video games and LGBTQ+ representation

LGBTQ+ representations in media have changed significantly over the past decades, with new media genres and technologies introducing novel opportunities for LGBTQ+ (self-)representation (Gross, 2001; Sender, 2012). Scholars have largely neglected video games as cultural intermediaries, with Seiffert and Nothhaft (2015) stating that video games "should be considered the 'missing media' in public relations- and strategic communications-research" (p. 255).

Media and communication scholars have analyzed LGBTQ+ representation across various types of media, finding that the one-dimensionality of queer identities holds true across most media representations (Gross, 2001; Comeforo, 2013; Nölke, 2018). Despite this narrow visibility of identities, representation, in general, seems to be improving (GLAAD, 2021a,c, 2022). In 2019, the 30th GLAAD Media Awards inaugurated the category for Outstanding Video Game, acknowledging LGBTQ+ representation in this media form and hoping to incentivize a further increase of LGBTQ+ stories and characters (Harvey, 2019).

One important source, which charts and categorizes LGBTQ+ inclusion in video games, is the LGBTQ Video Game Archive (lgbtqgamearchive.com), the first scholarly database of queer content in video games. Using this archive created by Adrienne Shaw and her research assistants (Ruberg, 2017; Shaw, 2017), several scholars have analyzed LGBTQ+ representation in video games. Shaw and Friesem (2016) laid the groundwork for the archive by categorizing LGBTQ+ content in 351 games, concluding that this content takes many different forms. To address how LGBTQ+ character representation evolved through the years, Utsch et al. (2017) analyzed 861 video games listed in the archive. They noted an increase in the representation of LGBTQ+ characters over the years and a diversification in the portrayed identities (ibid). Providing contrasting findings, Shaw et al. (2019) emphasize that the diversification of most LGBTQ+ identities remains relatively low, despite an increase in released games.

In their research on transgender representation, Thach (2021) found that video game narratives seemed to reflect the real-life understandings of transness over the years, becoming less stigmatized and including less harmful stereotypes. In addition, they noted that only indie games had trans-centered perspectives in their narratives (ibid). Building on Sender's (2012) concentric circle model of media production, Thach (2021) argues that the production of video games operates similarly, with indie games offering more possibilities for queer representation than games produced or published by mid-size or major companies.

Including LGBTQ+ representation in any entertainment product can yield negative effects on general consumer segments. Media products with LGBTQ+ inclusion can alienate consumers that do not hold favorable LGBTQ+ attitudes (Cheng et al., 2023). However, the alienation of these consumers is not part of our research, because we utilize queer theory for our critical discourse analysis (CDA, see below).

3. Research questions

Hallahan et al. (2007) emphasize that studying strategic communication includes observing how an organization "presents itself in society as a social actor in the creation of public culture and in the discussion of public issues" (p. 27). For a successful organization–stakeholder relationship, it is important that organizations recognize the marginalization history of the LGBTQ+ public and employ authentic strategic communication, meaning communication should reflect sincere organizational practices.

Since LGBTQ+ alignment and support (communication) are part of CSR, when these messages are vague or misleading, they are considered rainbow washing. If authenticity is not achieved in the eyes of queer stakeholders, i.e., communication is not consistent with organizational practices, the relationship will be compromised. Research on CSR and rainbow washing has shown that only consistent and authentic support messages positively affect the organization–stakeholder relationship (Ciszek and Pounders, 2020; Lim et al., 2022). Hence, for our research, we have formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: How do video games with various queer branding differ in their strategic communication on social media during Pride Month?
RQ1.1: How does this communication compare to off-months?

Examining how Pride Month communication differs from off-months allows us to analyze whether video game companies use their games to solely position themselves as LGBTQ+ allies for corporate profit in June, hence, engaging in rainbow washing.

Also, the differentiation between video games that include various (or different) queer representations gives us another opportunity to analyze CSR strategies targeted at different queer stakeholders. We use queer branding to differentiate between how overtly games were positioned as queer. The queer representation in *Tell Me Why* is strongly intertwined with the narrative, as one of the main playable characters is a transgender man. Due to the game being narrative-driven, the experience of this character is heavily incorporated into the game world. On the other hand, the incorporation of queer representation in *Bugsnax* is not deeply embedded in the narrative. Queer (non-playable) characters exist

within the game, but their experiences as queer individuals are not the focus of the narrative at any point.

Authenticity is especially important for marginalized publics, such as LGBTQ+ stakeholders. So, to contextualize our findings from the previous research questions, we examine authenticity on an organizational level, by utilizing Lim et al. (2022) POA scale:

RQ2: To what extent is the LGBTQ+ stakeholder alignment on social media authentic?

To answer this research question, we contextualize the video game companies' social media communication within other online discourses (interviews, company websites, etc.). Using the POA scale, we then compare organizational practices to their social media communication to observe whether the brands' CSR is sincere.

4. Methodology

For this research, the video games *Tell Me Why* and *Bugsnax* were selected. Both feature queer representation, but with varying incorporation in their narratives, hence considered as variously queer branded. The social media accounts on Twitter (Bugsnax (YH Game) [@YoungHorses]., 2022; Tell Me Why [@TellMeWhyGame], 2022a), and Instagram (Tell Me Why [@tellmewhygame], 2022b; Young Horses [@younghorsesgames], 2022), as well as supporting organizational communication (e.g., websites and interviews) were analyzed to answer the RQs.

The sampling strategy for this research was non-probabilistic convenience sampling. *Bugsnax* and *Tell Me Why* were chosen because they were both released in the same year and nominated for the GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Video Game (GLAAD, 2021b). While both games were nominated for outstanding queer representation, what also proves interesting for our research is that even if both games were developed by indie companies, which provide a safer space for queer individuals (Thach, 2021), *Tell Me Why* is still published by Microsoft. Being a major publisher, this could involve different organizational practices. Additionally, these two games were the only ones selected from the GLAAD nominees for 2021 because they were the only indie-developed games within the adventure game genre, even if they do provide completely different adventure experiences. However, the main reason for our selection of these games is their difference in queer branding or what we use to mean narrative incorporation, which we use to contrast our results.

Tell Me Why is a narrative adventure game developed by DONTNOD Entertainment and published by Xbox Game Studios (a Microsoft division). It follows the twins Alyson and Tyler Ronan as they relive their childhood. The game features two LGBTQ+ characters: the protagonist Tyler, a transgender man, and Michael, a queer Tlingit man. Tyler is the first playable trans protagonist from a major studio. Since the game is character-driven, the narrative centers around Tyler's trans experience. The queer aspect of the narrative is, therefore, central to the game experience and an integral part of the branding. The second game *Bugsnax* was developed and published by the independent game studio Young Horses. It is an adventure game that revolves around catching half-bug half-snack creatures while solving the disappearance of a missing explorer. The narrative does not center around queer

narratives, but there are both a lesbian and a gay couple, as well as a non-binary character.

To analyze the organizational communication and practices and contextualize them fully, CDA[2] informed by queer theory is utilized. The focus of CDA lies in "the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance" (Dijk, 1993, p. 249). The stereotypes and constructed images of queer consumers and the LGBTQ+ market directly influence the social cognition of LGBTQ+ individuals, furthering the reproduction of heteronormative dominance. The queer theory centers on the intersection of discourse and identity creation (Jagose, 1997). Therefore, we coded our data by focusing on LGBTQ+ stakeholder identity, as well as how LGBTQ+ issues were discussed by the organizations. Furthermore, it was of interest how direct the strategic communication was about LGBTQ+ identities and issues.

The data was collected between November and December 2022. Young Horses utilizes one Twitter account for all their communication and has posted 3.823 tweets; the first *Bugsnax* tweet was published in June 2020. On Instagram, they shared 4 posts. *Tell Me Why* has posted 540 tweets and 100 Instagram posts. While the final sample for *RQ1* and *RQ1.1* only includes posts that pertain to LGBTQ+ topics, all material was surveyed to provide adequate context. The final sample includes original posts from the main accounts as well as retweets by the accounts. Retweets were included as they also serve as SC to further LGBTQ+ stakeholder alignment. This resulted in a final sample of 15 *Bugsnax* tweets on the Young Horses Twitter account; all their Instagram posts were excluded. For *Tell Me Why*, 77 tweets on their Twitter account and 9 Instagram posts were included. This disparity in communication is also part of our findings, where one company chose to communicate much more concerning LGBTQ+ topics than the other. However, to provide context to tweets addressing LGBTQ+ stakeholders, the entire corpus of social media communication from both companies was analyzed. The final social media communication sample is used to understand how the video game branding of the companies influences the way they strategically communicate with their LGBTQ+ stakeholders.

To answer *RQ2*, the social media sample and further online discourses surrounding the companies, such as interviews, the company websites, news articles, and YouTube videos, were analyzed using the dimensions of POA (Lim et al., 2022)—23 sources for *Tell Me Why* and eight for *Bugsnax*. Here, the goal is to compare organizational practices with their strategic communication, to see if they are sincerely aligning with their LGBTQ+ stakeholders, engaging in real CSR, or participating in rainbow washing.

The final codebook used to analyze the data has two major codes dealing with *RQ1* (LGBTQ+ stakeholder identity and LGBTQ+ Discourse) and *RQ2* (Perception of Organizational Authenticity). Most codes were created deductively based on the

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2 To comply with the principles of CDA, the bias of the researchers and by extent this research should be stated. This work is biased due to the method utilized and the circumstances under which it was written, which seeks to deconstruct the LGBTQ+ stakeholder identity and illuminate how organizations discursively reify these hierarchical constructs.

literature review. Subcodes were refined with inductive coding after the material was coded for the first time.

5. Results

5.1. Game production context

Looking at organizational practices, *Tell Me Why* was developed by DONTNOD Entertainment and published by Xbox Game Studios, which is a division of Microsoft. There are no conclusive numbers on how many queer individuals were part of the production process; however, there are a select few that communicated openly about their involvement. DONTNOD and Xbox Game Studios worked closely with two transgender GLAAD members, Nick Adams, Director of Transgender Representation; and Blair Durkee, Special Consultant for Gaming, ensuring an authentic trans narrative and character. Adams was consulted regarding the story, dialogue, character design, environmental design, and voice actor casting. Additionally, the voice actor for Tyler is August Black who is trans himself. Black was given the opportunity to influence dialogue and aspects of Tyler's character. With the availability of localized voiceovers for other languages, it was also revealed that they cast trans-voice actors for all languages.

While Young Horses is a smaller development team of nine people, there are also no conclusive numbers for the involved queer individuals. The Creative Director, Kevin Zuhn, is non-binary and they received additional writing support from Sage Coffey who is also non-binary. The queer representation in *Bugsnax* is strongly influenced by their lived experiences as non-binary individuals. The non-binary character Floofty Fizzlebean is voiced by Casey Mongillo, who is also non-binary. At least two other queer people were involved with the game, but it is unclear if they influenced the writing.

5.2. Communication strategy

Comparing the final analysis reveals that the games differ greatly in their strategic communication on social media. To assess these differences in communication about LGBTQ+ topics, all posts were first coded and categorized by their publishing date. While *RQ1* and *RQ1.1* only differentiate between Pride Month and off-months, it became clear that it was important to include other awareness and visibility days, such as Trans Day of Remembrance, since they also play a role in public relation efforts with these stakeholders.

Tell Me Why posted 77 tweets that pertained to LGBTQ+ topics, with less than half during off-months. Of these, 26 tweets were posted during Pride Month and 17 were on awareness and visibility dates. A similar distribution pattern can be observed for their Instagram posts. Instagram, in general, served more as a secondary posting platform, with the material centering around game content. Instagram posts mainly pertain to the trans representation within the game. So, *Tell Me Why* strategically posted about LGBTQ+ topics during Pride Month and other LGBTQ+-related days. Most of the content that was posted during these dates communicated stakeholder alignment through LGBTQ+ support, care, or advocacy. The account often urged their community to follow their example and stand up against discrimination and anti-trans sentiment. Furthermore, they urged their audience to financially support trans individuals and communities.

Tell Me Why platformed other queer games, individuals, and developers throughout the year, which positioned them further as an ally. When trans rights were at stake, like the revocation of gender-affirming healthcare for trans youth in Arkansas, they shared information on the situation and retweeted resources. During Pride Month 2020, the second queer character was revealed, and in 2021 and 2022, the game was made available for free for Pride Month. By making the game available for free, they were asking their community to spend their money on trans and queer charities instead. In the same blog post, they also recommended other games with queer representation. These are only some examples by *Tell Me Why*, where their organizational practices match their strategic communication alignment with LGBTQ+ stakeholders.

On the other hand, *Bugsnax* did not utilize Instagram as a communication channel for LGBTQ+ alignment at all. Of the four posts, none pertained to queer topics and were therefore excluded. Surprisingly, Twitter did not attempt to overtly align with LGBTQ+ stakeholders either. Since 12 June 2020, the account has only published 17 tweets that touch on LGBTQ+ topics. Of those tweets, only one was posted during Pride Month, the others were published during off-months.

This sole remaining Pride Month tweet is a retweet that strongly condemns the practice of rainbow capitalism (rainbow washing) and urges people to spend their money directly with queer artists. The remaining tweets highlight other queer individuals who were involved in the production of *Bugsnax* or spread information about various queer games and developers.

Young Horses generally refrained from overtly communicating LGBTQ+ stakeholder alignment and focused on platforming or supporting queer individuals in the video game industry instead. This communication strategy is in line with the opinions of both Kevin Zhun and Sage Coffey. They both stated that they aimed to normalize queer representation and inclusion in the game without othering anyone (King, 2021; Troughton, 2021a). Hence, social media communication focused more on the quirky half-bug, half-snack creatures, and fan creations rather than centering on their queer characters. Their communication strategy remained the same throughout the year. Pride Month and other LGBTQ+-centric days did not change how *Bugsnax* communicates about LGBTQ+ topics; they offer a platform to queer games and individuals all year long alongside their quirky creatures.

Queer branding and communication

Tell Me Why, in contrast to *Bugsnax*, is more directly branded as a queer game, through its integration of trans narratives, and this is reflected in their strategic communication efforts on social media. Even though *Bugsnax* amassed more tweets in roughly the same amount of time, only a marginal amount of them mentioned LGBTQ+ topics. The account only posted one tweet during Pride Month whereas *Tell Me Why* accumulated 26 tweets and six Instagram posts. While *Bugsnax's* strategic communication conveys the normalcy of queer identities, *Tell Me Why* conveys attempts to make them more visible. Consequently, this comparison shows that

the game with the more obvious queer branding focused extensively on communicating alignment with their LGBTQ+ stakeholders during Pride Month. Communication efforts include awareness and visibility days, with more than half of the *Tell Me Why* tweets occurring then. *Bugsnax* does post during these events but not with the intention of using them to overtly further stakeholder alignment. Hence, *Tell Me Why* deliberately engages in strategic communication during Pride Month and visibility or awareness days, with the intention of strengthening LGBTQ+ stakeholder alignment. They usually do so by voicing support, care, and advocacy for LGBTQ+ communities and their issues. In doing so, *Tell Me Why* positions itself as a socially responsible brand. Since they place great emphasis on trans visibility and awareness days, this consistent communication positions them as a trans-friendly brand as well.

On the other hand, *Bugsnax* seldomly engaged in such activities, with their sole Pride Month tweet condemning rainbow washing instead. Most of *Bugsnax's* tweets count as off-month communication, they are utilized to showcase queer individuals who worked on the game or to make a larger audience aware of other queer indie games and their creators. While not making overt alignment claims to stakeholders, this strategic communication normalizes queer identities and positions the company as a queer-supportive brand, accordingly aligning with LGBTQ+ stakeholder expectations. Their strategic communication also appears authentic to their stakeholders due to the sparse but consistent off-month communication.

Overall, both game companies engage in different methods of stakeholder alignment; *Tell Me Why* communicates more often and adamantly advocates for LGBTQ+ rights, while *Bugsnax* communicates sparingly, and therefore attempts to normalize the existence of queer identities within its games and the industry.

5.3. Authenticity compared

To explore how authentic the communicated LGBTQ+ stakeholder alignment is, the answers to RQ1 were contextualized with further organizational discourse, such as websites, blog posts, and interviews. The data was categorized along Lim et al. (2022) authenticity dimensions (continuity, credibility, representativeness, integrity, and symbolism) with the objective being to observe how organizational practices compare to the strategic communication of CSR initiatives by video game brands. Using the POA framework (Lim et al., 2022) to look at organizational practices allows us to assess the perceived authenticity of the brands for LGBTQ+ stakeholders. It is important to highlight that the following analysis only allows us to note the perceived authenticity of the video game brands and not whether they are authentic in their organizational practices.

5.3.1. Tell me why

Analyzing the perceived authenticity of *Tell Me Why* proved to be more complex due to the publisher and developer being separate organizations operating independently from one another.

Additionally, Xbox Game Studio operates within the Microsoft corporation, which complicates matters further. One of the first perceived organizational authenticity dimensions to observe is *integrity*. The Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Corporate Equality Index provided great insight into Microsoft's LGBTQ+ company policies. For 17 years, Microsoft has received a score of 100, exemplifying its supportive policies (Capossela, 2022). Unfortunately, no such rating was available for DONTNOD, leaving only their website for further insight, where they highlight their inclusivity and diversity as key elements in their corporate practice.

For *continuity*, the Corporate Equality Index gave a great indication of Microsoft's continued commitment to its LGBTQ+ employees. DONTNOD has a history of LGBTQ+ character inclusion in their games, although some representation has been criticized in the past, arguing that it used the "Bury Your Gays" trope (Chan, 2017; Troughton, 2021b). The continued support of LGBTQ+ communities is also constantly voiced in the social media communication of *Tell Me Why*. In our sample, they supported trans and queer communities, also urging their audience to do the same.

Credibility was observed in the cooperation of Nick Adams, August Black, and Blair Durkee during the production process. These valuable trans perspectives helped DONTNOD and Xbox Game Studios in their endeavor to deliver an authentic character and narrative, one which does not rely on harmful tropes and stereotypes. They did not shy away from including negative experiences that can occur for trans people but dealt with them in an adequate way instead. Another demonstration of commitment to queer representation was the choice to only hire trans voice actors for the localized versions of the game. Tyler's depiction as a well-rounded character, who is not only defined by his trans identity, offers stakeholders the ability to connect with the character and provides a positive media representation, falling under the *symbolism* dimension of authenticity.

For *representativeness,* it should be emphasized that a continuous effort is made by *Tell Me Why* to platform not only queer individuals but also queer creators and their games. However, as of December 2022, one factor that negatively affects the perceived authenticity of *Tell Me Why* is that the game is not available to purchase in 13 countries, among which are China, Russia, and Turkey. Being unavailable in these countries, which have a more anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, does not support the strategic communication made to align with LGBTQ+ stakeholders. Instead, it highlights national cultural values and identities, meaning that regional markets are prioritized over universal LGBTQ+ stakeholder support.

5.3.2. Bugsnax

Since Young Horses is a small independent developer and has only published two games, their perceived authenticity cannot be analyzed conclusively due to the lack of online discourse surrounding their organizational practices. Their website, in general, seems to imply an LGBTQ+ inclusive working environment, and the job listings strongly encourage queer people

to apply. Of the nine employees, Kevin Zuhn is the only non-binary person. Other queer people could not be publicly identified. The wording of their job listing adds to the *credibility* of Young Horses, with it being an equal-opportunity workplace with genuine LGBTQ+ affiliation. Furthermore, *credibility* is shown in the interviews with Kevin Zuhn and Sage Coffey when both elaborate on how they combat harmful stereotypes in the writing process and try to deliver seamless queer inclusion. Employing Casey Mongillo as the voice for the non-binary character also supports the commitment of *Bugsnax* to queer *representation*. Not including explanation scenes in writing further accentuates the normalcy of queer identities in the *Bugsnax* universe. Coffey states that the absence of these scenes is because the game was not written purely with a cisgender audience in mind. The *representation* of a lesbian and gay couple, in addition to a non-binary character, stresses *Bugsnax's* commitment to representing the diversity of queer individuals.

6. Discussion

Our research examined the strategic communication of the respective developers/publishers of the video games *Tell Me Why* and *Bugsnax* to assess their LGBTQ+ stakeholder alignment. We compared their strategic communication on social media and their corporate social responsibility practices (LGBTQ+), to assess their alignment and perceived authenticity from LGBTQ+ stakeholders. Comparing their strategic communication with organizational practices communicated in other online discourses, our findings indicate that perceived authenticity is usually achieved not only through fulfilling the criteria of the perceived organizational authenticity scale (Lim et al., 2022) but also when strategic communication with stakeholders is consistent with certain organizational practices. Our findings noted that this strategic communication is influenced by the queer branding of the video games, which we use in this research to mean how much LGBTQ+ themes are directly involved in the game narrative.

Bugsnax and Young Horses take a different approach in their communication with LGBTQ+ stakeholders. While *Tell Me Why* uses every opportunity to showcase its alignment with its LGBTQ+ audience, due to the direct involvement of trans characters in the game narrative, *Bugsnax* does not. The goal of *Bugsnax's* strategic communication is not to foster LGBTQ+ stakeholder alignment with their consumers. They utilize their platform to integrate queer representation into the normalcy of everyday life, like how it is done within the game. Zuhn and Coffey both expressed that they want to combat the otherness of queer inclusion that is often dominant in other media. Neither their Twitter nor Instagram accounts engage in extensive Pride Month communication, just like how queer representation is never 'othered' within their games. However, their sincere alignment with LGBTQ+ stakeholders is made clear in other organizational communication.

For example, with *Bugsnax*, we noted no divergence between communicated CSR and corporate practice, so essentially, they appear to not engage in rainbow washing. The most notable aspect of their strategic communication is their refusal to treat queer and cisgender identities differently. They avoid othering queer identities and deconstruct the "us vs. them" narrative, both

within their games and through their strategic communication patterns. *Bugsnax* does this by keeping overt LGBTQ+ stakeholder support to a minimum and instead using their account to give a platform to queer video games and their queer creators, not only during Pride Month but throughout the year. Overall, their organizational communication is in line with organizational practices found in other online discourses, indicating that Young Horses and *Bugsnax* are perceived to be authentically aligned with LGBTQ+ stakeholders.

On the other hand, DONTNOD uses *Tell Me Why's* social media as a platform to overtly align with LGBTQ+ stakeholders. This is due to the game's branding, or how heavily LGBTQ+ themes are involved in the narrative. Dealing strongly with trans issues, the game is utilized as a vehicle to raise awareness and advocate for LGBTQ+ rights during Pride Month. As pointed out, since queer issues are within and central to their game, DONTNOD's strategic communication incorporates them as well. Still, the perceived authenticity of *Tell Me Why* in part resembles Venter's (2021) findings concerning *Overwatch* and Blizzard Entertainment, meaning that Xbox Game Studios (the publisher) support its LGBTQ+ stakeholders, but only to a certain extent.

With *Tell Me Why* being unavailable to purchase in several countries with anti-LGBTQ+ policies, this demonstrates how the publisher prioritizes potential market share over real CSR. *Bugsnax,* on the other hand, is available in every country, which again echoes their sentiment of not wanting to other queer identities. Inconsistent CSR and rainbow washing might be easier to avoid when operating as a smaller organization; nevertheless, it is still possible when most of the dimensions of authenticity (Lim et al., 2022) are met. Still, our research indicates that walking the walk can be done when queer inclusion is the core of the strategic communication effort.

7. Limitations and future work

The limitations of this research include not considering strategic communication outside of social media by both companies, as well as not deconstructing the queer identities within the games themselves, which would have greatly benefited the discourse analysis. Deconstructing the identities within the games while beneficial does not strictly fit under the umbrella of strategic communication, and hence was not included. However, it is still communication targeting stakeholders and can be considered important. Also, only the main account for the video games was analyzed. This was done to ensure that communication originated from sources (and content) of interest and to reduce the amount of filtering involved. Future research can incorporate additional associated accounts (publishers, developers, etc.) to contextualize the strategic communication efforts more adequately while incorporating more filtering to pinpoint relevant content.

Moreover, we understand that our work is only concerning two specific cases and that findings may differ for other video game developers and publishers. However, by creating a case definition based on queer branding, we selected typical, frequent, and theoretically relevant cases for our

research (Mayring, 2007). The next step to validate our findings and draw broader conclusions would be to broaden the range of cases. Case study researchers recommend working with three to ten single cases (Yin, 2005), which we can select with various ranges of queer representation and narratives.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human data in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The social media data was accessed and analyzed in accordance with the platform's terms of use and all relevant institutional/national regulations.

Author contributions

IG performed the critical discourse analysis. Both authors contributed to the conception, design of the study, current manuscript, read, revised, and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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