

Reaction Paper 1: Social Media Platforms - Discord

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October 5, 2021

Started out in 2015 as a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), instant messaging, and digital distribution platform, Discord has quickly grown into one of the most popular social media platforms among the gaming community. Originally founded to address the communication issue while gaming online, the platform allows its users to easily join a conversation using various means of media, from text, voice to image and video. Discord success is not only reflected in its metrics which boast up to 150 million monthly active users and 4 billion server conversations minutes daily (Discord, n.d.), but also in the reality that the platform has outgrown its original purpose of connecting the gaming community and is now being used by people from all sorts of communities: sports, arts, and study to name but a few. This paper will take a deeper look into Discord as a social media platform to analyze the following: the key factors behind its success; its effectiveness in delivering value to users; the different groups of consumers that the platform serves; and some major strategic decisions since its launch.

Several factors have contributed to Discord's success, most notably the technology, customizable features, and marketing strategies. From a technological standpoint, Discord has an edge over its competitors at the time it was launched thanks to its ability to consistently sync audio clearly among multiple users with low latency and handle millions of concurrent voice channels across webs, smartphones, and standalone apps using WebRTC (Vass, 2018), which was not commonly seen in other voice chat apps then (Discord, n.d.). For online gaming, especially team-based games where real-time, uninterrupted communication is important among teammates, Discord's voice chat technology has addressed the issue and thus plays a key role in the platform's success. In terms of features, Discord is highly customizable in addition to its low entrance barrier. Users can join or create their own servers for free and within each server, there can be multiple channels (for either voice chat or text messaging) dedicated to different subtopics. This is quite comparable to Reddit featuring various subreddits pertaining to a wide range of topics that users can choose to join, or Slack with various private chat rooms for users to talk using different media means (Rodriguez, 2021). Nevertheless, Discord's high degree of customization goes beyond servers' structures as the platform also allows server owners to create their own sets of emojis, stickers, and themes for their servers. Another feature that highlighted the platform's identity is its openness to integrating custom bots for a wide range of purposes, from administrative tasks like MEE6 for server moderation to recreational activities like Groovy and Rythm for music streaming, or even productivity help like Appollo for event scheduling and PollBot for poll management (Santora, 2021). The high degree of customization Discord offers appeals not only to casual users who seek to join or create a group chat suitable for their particular purpose or interest but also attracts creators who want to showcase their creative products and express their individuality towards the community. Customization, as will be further discussed later in this paper, is also a significant contributor to Discord's effectiveness in delivering value to its users, which, in turn, should further explain why it is a key factor to the platform's success. In addition to technology and customization, Discord's success can also be attributed to its strategies adopted for marketing. Despite starting out as a platform for social networking for gamers developed by the people who are experienced with online gaming and developing social gaming platforms, over time, Discord does not limit its service nor marketing efforts within the gaming community itself but rather opts for a more inclusive

approach, by encouraging streamers, influencers, businesses, and in general, anyone to build and nurture their communities on the platform: “Discord made it easy to genuinely communicate with friends, going beyond casual talking. Friends were staying in touch with their various communities...the goal was simple: make Discord an inviting and comfortable home to jump into with your communities and friends” (Discord, n.d.). With such a mission statement and the advertising strategies aimed towards different groups of people like the recently released short film “Discord: The Movie” about the meaning of the platform and how it can be a place for everyone (IMDb, 2021), Discord has demonstrated its evolution not just in numbers and metrics, but also in its values and goals while still maintaining the core essence and characteristics of what it originally set out to be. The adaptability of the platform reflected in the evolution in development and branding strategies has, therefore, been playing a major role in its exploding success.

Having established the key factors in the success of Discord, this paper will continue to analyze the effectiveness of the platform in delivering value to its users. As analyzed in the previous section, the factors that contribute to Discord’s efficiency in serving users are the ones that significantly drive its success. To start with, Discord is accessible to anyone with an internet connection and through various means. Having a low entrance barrier, Discord offers its core services and functions to anyone, be they value creators or value consumers, for free. Anyone can join or create their own server, and invite others without having to pay any fee or subscription. Being available on the web, smartphones, and standalone apps, Discord allows its users to access the platform and communicate with others from anywhere at any time. While this seems like a common benefit that any social media platform should have, for a platform that is usually used by online gamers like Discord, the accessibility that it provides allows gamers to stay connected to their teammates whether or not they are actually playing the game together. For example, even though games like League of Legends or Teamfight Tactics (Riot Games) do offer a client-based voice chat system, it only allows premade players to join the same voice chat when they are in the same lobby. Discord, however, allows players to be on the voice channel even before and after they exit the lobby, and allows non-premade players to join the conversation through an invite link to the server. In other cases, users can also stream their gameplay through the channel so that others can spectate, which makes social networking through gaming much more convenient and sustainable. Going beyond simple, convenient accessibility, Discord strives for inclusivity by making the platform a welcoming place for users from all sorts of backgrounds and communities. The customizability, as discussed previously, offers users an abundance of tools and accessories to build not just a server or a group chat, but a place for them to hang out with other like-minded individuals sharing the same interests, background, etc. For instance, a Discord server for a university’s esports club can be divided into multiple channels for different games, so that club members can easily find a group chat for the games that they are interested in and socialize with other clubmates. The multiple-channel feature allows Discord users to build a large community within their server while still ensuring the quality and relevance of conversations. From a more specific perspective of value creators, Discord is also a place for them to build a presence and to generate actual engagement with their consumers/followers. In an article for The Atlantic, Lorenz (2019) stated that many influencers agree that Discord is actually a better place for them to “effectively communicate

with their community” than other mainstream social media platforms, where conversations are either displayed to the public and disorganized like Twitter, difficult to keep track of and respond to like Instagram DMs and comments, or sometimes simply bad quality like Youtube comment sections and Reddit threads. Discord, on the other hand, as stated by the platform’s Chief Marketing Officer - Resmini, is “an opt-in, private, chat-oriented product”, which facilitates user engagement through quality conversations and helps influencers or value creators in general, to have their voices heard even if they do not have a large number of followers. This, along with the platform’s openness to customization and creative works (like custom emojis and bots), are perhaps among the main reasons why the platform has attracted so many influencers, content creators, and even businesses from communities outside of gaming. Other examples of factors that might have helped Discord deliver value to users more effectively are plentiful, including the fact that the platform is not supported by advertisements, which, in a way, improves conversation quality among server members to be more relevant and less interruptive, while still not (greatly) affecting value creators’ ability to promote and advertise their presence, products, or services (thanks to the #announcements channels for broadcasting to server members). However, to put it simply, Discord did a great job in delivering value to their initial target users - the gaming community, and while doing so, it has also proven itself to be capable of reaching out and catering to so many other user segments.

The previous sections have demonstrated that Discord’s success, to a large extent, can be attributed to its efficiency in serving its users, both the initially targeted segment and the ones that it consequently reached, which will be further elaborated in this section. Previously, this paper has established that users of Discord are no longer limited to those within the gaming community since more and more people, around 70% of its users, are using the platform for different purposes as well (Rodriguez, 2021). However, since Discord adopts a platform business model, which “creates and facilitates the means of connection” between the value creator and the value consumer (Hermans, n.d.), to simplify the breaking down and analysis of Discord user base, this paper will look at two such categories. Discord’s value consumers consist mostly of those from various communities mentioned earlier, from gaming, personal hobbies, to arts, study, and even working, who join the servers to socialize with like-minded people. This would mean value consumers on Discord would make up the majority of its user base. On the other hand, value creators, while varying in terms of background, associations, and means of value creation, share the same motivation of using the platform to promote their presence and offer all sorts of value to consumers. Examples of value creators on Discord obviously include the people of public interest, brands, businesses. However, that also includes server owners and moderators who create the servers and are responsible for managing and administering the ecosystem of channels and members within each of them to ensure that interactions are properly regulated and generate a sense of engagement. Discord’s customizability also allows digital art designers and programmers to create custom emojis, stickers, and bots for a server, which also makes them value creators on the platform. To further demonstrate user segments, this paper will take a look at an example of the custom mechanical keyboard community on Discord. Pretty straightforward, the value consumers are the mechanical keyboard enthusiasts whose purpose of joining Discord is to locate their communities where they can engage with fellow enthusiasts, talk about the

hobby-related topics (e.g., their preferences, group-buys, reviews, meet-ups, etc.), or look for buying/selling/trading opportunity. The value creators are more diverse, including streamers/content creators (e.g., Taeha Types, Glarses, AndyVNguyen), custom mechanical keyboard vendors (e.g., Ilumkb, Ashkeeps, Bolsa Supply), who have their own servers for their followers and customers to hang out, talk about the hobby, and interact with them. Within each of those servers, the admins, mods, and anyone who takes part in customizing the server through custom stickers, emojis, etc. are also considered value creators. Other than that, within the community, a lot of group buys are organized for different custom design products, ranging from keycaps, keyboard sets, to accessories, as well as services like keyboard building, soldering, switch lubing, among others. This creates another group of value creators, which consists of designers who look to promote their projects by announcing their interest checks, group buy details on Discord servers to attract vendors to feature the sales of those products on their online shop and customers to join those group-buys; and the people who offer those services. These designers and service providers can either create their own server dedicated to their products and services (e.g., product/service details, updates, ETA, shipping information) or join other servers to promote themselves. At the end of the day, however, all of these value creators can also be considered value consumers since almost all of them are also keyboard enthusiasts who seek to engage with their communities, and Discord offers them the opportunities, means, and tools, or the platform, in general, to be both. To sum up, Discord user segments, much like other social media, can be broken down into value consumers and value creators, and the platform facilitates the interaction between these two segments, as well as allowing users to transition between the two roles smoothly.

Finally, as Discord has exploded in popularity since its inception, the platform also went through some major strategic decisions that affected many facets of the business. This section will discuss two of the most important strategic decisions made since Discord was launched: cracking down on far-right and hate groups and moving away from a game-centric branding strategy. The decision from Discord to take an aggressive stance against the alt-right movement was made after the Charlottesville protests orchestrated by white supremacists back in 2017 that killed a person and injured 34 people (Roose, 2017). In the beginning years of Discord, the platform, although quickly gained popularity among the gaming community, was also well known for being home to the Alt-Right groups to gather and organize demonstrations, protests, among other extremist activities (Brown, 2020). In response to the Charlottesville protests, Discord had removed the altright.com server which was associated with the event and released a statement emphasizing its mission to “bring people together around gaming” as well as its firm stance against hate and violence (Discord, 2017). Evidently, this was not just a one-time effort as ever since then, Discord had established a Trust and Safety team to research and respond to the emergence of new hate groups (Brown, 2020), and continued to ban many servers and accounts promoting Nazi and other far-right ideologies. Alexander (2018) from Polygon reported that despite the unrevealed number of removed servers, Discord users did notice the disappearance of several neo-Nazi and hate groups, including Atomwaffen, Nordic Resistance Movement, and Uncensored politics. Discord has shown that it is capable of maintaining its commitment towards preventing violence and hate on the platform, through both statements and actions. Being a social media platform that aims towards providing a safe, private, and welcoming environment for people

to hang out and socialize, the company's firm actions and decisions are aligned with its value and demonstrated its dedication towards servicing and protecting its users. These decisions have proven to pay off later as it has supported the platform in its later decision to go mainstream, making itself more accessible to people for other purposes outside of gaming. Realizing the potentials of Discord as not just simply a place for gaming communication, the company had worked on streamlining the platform and shifting its branding more towards a place where people can truly belong. By listening to its users' wishes for the platform to be more welcoming, inclusive, and trustworthy, Discord had reached a decision that its branding needed to adapt in order to keep up. As a result, the company had made some changes to the design and functionalities of the platform, including making the onboarding experience for new users less 'intimidating', introducing video call channels for a better socializing experience, increasing voice and video capacity, and changing the in-app jokes and references to be less gaming-specific (Citron, 2020). All of these changes to the platform, along with the new tagline: "Your place to talk" have represented the efforts of the company in response to the common misconception about Discord being just a place for gamers and can be considered a step up in its branding strategies to keep up with its expanding market. Both of the discussed decisions have turned out in favor of the company by making the place not only a safer place for its existing users but also more welcoming towards newcomers. While the first decision aimed at solidifying the company's stance and commitment to protecting its communities and improving the service quality, the second decision was made not with the intention to completely rebrand itself, but rather to appeal to a wider user base while still keeping its core essence of being a social networking place for people to come, talk, and belong. In an article for Forbes, Brown (2020) reported up to 300 million new registered users and an over 50% increase in the number of monthly active users following these decisions. Moreover, the decision to change its branding also happen at a critical time during the COVID-19 pandemic: As Discord turned itself into a more accessible and welcoming platform, an influx of people from non-gaming communities turn to the platform to connect, socialize, and work, which led to a sharp increase in the monthly active user count by almost 300% in 2020 compared to the previous year (CBInsights, 2021), further highlighting the timeliness of these decisions.

In analyzing Discord as a social media platform, this paper has discussed several key aspects, namely the success factors, efficiency, user groups, and some important strategic decisions. Discord's success is largely attributable to its well-developed technology, customizable features, and adaptive marketing strategies, all of which distinguish it from other competitors and contributed to its ability to effectively deliver value to its broad, expanding spectrum of users. This paper has also analyzed the user segments on the platform and gave an example to show how Discord is capable of providing tools and means to help these different user groups to experience the platform in the most beneficial and fulfilling way possible. On top of that, the strategic decisions discussed have shown the company's firm, serious approach to protecting the users and, at the same time, a flexible, adaptive mindset in marketing strategies allowing itself to pick out and seize the opportunities to grow its market. While no social media platform is truly free of flaws and downsides, Discord could be considered a prime example of a unique platform that excels at what it is essentially meant to do - being a place for everyone - and so much more.

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