

**Serious Leisure Practices and Kin-making Amongst Trading Card Players in  
Urban Gauteng, South Africa**

**by**

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Keywords and terms .....	iv
List of important terms .....	v
List of abbreviations.....	v
List of figures.....	1
1. Chapter One: Introduction.....	2
1.1 Introduction .....	2
1.2 Research questions .....	5
1.3 Outline.....	7
2. Chapter Two: Contextualising TCGs globally and locally .....	8
2.1 <i>Yu-Gi-Oh!</i> and <i>Magic</i> as transnational media in South Africa .....	8
2.2 The scale of <i>Magic</i> and <i>Yu-Gi-Oh!</i> .....	12
3. Chapter Three: Fieldsites and research participants .....	15
3.1 The research participants at Dragon Town.....	16
3.2 The store Dragon Town.....	19
3.3 Research participants at The Geek Home.....	24
3.4 Introducing The Geek Home .....	25
3.5 What is a ‘regular’? .....	28
4. Chapter Four: Research Methodology.....	37
1.1 Introduction .....	37
4.1 Ethical considerations .....	38
4.2 My positionality .....	40
4.3 Data collection methods .....	41
4.4 Methods of data analysis.....	45
4.5 Limitations to the research.....	47
5. Chapter Five: Literature review .....	47
5.1 Kinship’s role in creating social relations, including friendship .....	48
5.2 Leisure and its significance for social relations.....	50
6. Chapter Six: Serious Leisure and Commodities .....	58
6.1 Commodities and selling the experience.....	58
6.2 Commodified serious leisure and its role in forming social relationships .....	65
7. Chapter Seven: Casual Leisure and work at Dragon Town .....	72
8. Chapter Eight: Conclusion.....	77
Bibliography .....	81
Appendix A.....	97

Letter of Invitation .....	97
Appendix B .....	99
Letter of Informed Consent .....	99
Appendix C .....	104
Consent Form.....	104
Appendix D.....	105
Permission Letter Geek Home .....	105
Permission Letter The Geek Home .....	106

## Abstract

This dissertation examines how adult trading card players in Gauteng form kinship and friendship ties with fellow urban residents through active participation in leisure activities hosted in privately owned trading card stores and organised globally by transnational corporations. Anthropologists have shown that formulations of kinship across the world are not confined to matters of blood, marriage or biology, and have documented a variety of kin-making practices that contribute to social reproduction. At the same time, recent contributions to the anthropology of leisure and popular culture encourage anthropologists not to view leisure as a passive act and not to think of consumers of leisure only as the 'victims' of corporations, but view leisure - even when organised privately and through corporations - as an expressive aspect of society which also contributes to social reproduction. Anthropologists also now argue that commodity exchange can achieve what earlier anthropologists ascribed exclusively to gift exchange, that is the formation of social ties. The literature also shows that social reproduction in urban contexts requires city residents and city dwellers to create new ways to make kin with strangers, and to turn strangers into friends. As such, this dissertation draws on empirical and ethnographic research conducted in Gauteng with adult players of trading card games to document how adults learn how to play trading card games, how players navigate and use the wider leisure scene including the two privately owned stores in which I conducted participant observation, how players create friend relationships through their participation in commoditised leisure.

### Keywords and terms

Leisure, friendship, kinship, trading card games, trading card players, official tournament stores, *Magic: the Gathering*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, fandom, popular culture, Gauteng, ethnography.

## List of important terms

Duelist	A Yu-Gi-Oh! player
Focus	To constantly attack one player.
Manga	A popular culture product and a Japanese comic with a distinctive art style that are often made to appeal to children
Playable space	A place, often stores, where players can meet to play trading card games with one another
Player	A person who plays trading card or board games
Pods	Groups of <i>Magic The Gathering</i> players who often play together.

## List of abbreviations

DND	Dungeons and Dragons
LARP	Live Action Role Play
LGS	Local Gaming Store
MTG	<i>Magic The Gathering</i>
OTS	Official Tournament Store
SABC	South African Broadcasting Commission
TCG	Trading card game
WPN	Wizards Play Network

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## List of figures

Figure 1: Zoey's view of the door .....	20
Figure 2: The Gathering sign above the door (Vahed, 2023) .....	21
Figure 3: Cashier's desk at Dragon Town (Vahed, 2024).....	21
Figure 4: Dragon Town's kitchenette (Vahed, 2024) .....	23
Figure 5: Floor plan of Dragon Town (Vahed, 2024) .....	24
Figure 6: Floor plan of The Geek Home (Vahed, 2024) .....	28
Figure 7: Traptrix deck (Vahed, 2023).....	32
Figure 8: Magic! Colour Wheel (MTG Fandom, n.d.).....	33

# 1. Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

This dissertation is about adult persons residing in Gauteng, South Africa who are brought together in leisure spaces by a global phenomenon, Trading Card Games, where they participate in various gaming activities and social exchanges, leading to the formation of social relationships, even communities. Trading Card Games are played across the world, and have become a commonplace leisure activity in urban centres. The players of trading card games are generally young individuals but not exclusively so. Players are generally cosmopolitan in outlook and are interested in or are followers of global popular culture. Over the last twenty years, a global subculture scene has emerged made up of fans and players from various nations (Anime News Network, 2023).

The global growth of Trading Card Games is made possible by the companies that develop the games and recently developed information and communication technologies such as the internet and mobile phone applications. The companies that develop trading card games, promote the cards and related accessories so that players can compete against each other in live events. Recent developments in computer technology, mobile devices and telecommunications technology further allow players who are not in close proximity to each other to communicate with one another and participate in playing trading card games.

The focus of this dissertation is on two Trading Card Games, namely *Magic: the Gathering* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* This dissertation focuses on exploring the activities and relationships that are formed through playing *Magic: the Gathering* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* in person, as opposed to during online encounters. Furthermore, this dissertation examines the in-person encounters between players, between players and myself as a researcher, between those who play and work in the leisure spaces, between those who buy and sell trading cards and other commodities, and between the corporations that created this leisure commodity and its consumers.

As an insider to this leisure scene, an active player of *Magic*, a resident of Gauteng, it is perhaps appropriate to introduce myself at this point, and to give the reader a sense of why I became curious about this topic which led me to do 'anthropology at home'.

At the time of writing this dissertation, I am 25 years old; I use she/her, I dye my hair bright colours and most importantly I am a fan of popular culture products. I share a few characteristics with the typical player of Trading Card Games. For one, like the typical player of Trading Card Games, I am a follower and consumer of global popular culture products. For many young women of my generation, global popular cultures have become very important. For example, Lacasa et al (2017:54) studied music fan culture and fan participation in British girls between the ages of 13 and 14 and found that girls build identities and communities around the celebrities they follow and the fans they become. The findings of this study, and many more, resonate with my personal experience because I have built a large part of my identity around popular culture.

Many of the relationships I have built since childhood are built on joint interests in and participation in fandom scenes or leisure communities, whether online or in person. I am a fan of, for example, K-Pop music group BTS, the genre of anime, the comedian and entertainer John Mulaney, to name but a few. I spend hours consuming media products that focus on my fan interests and then spend hours discussing that media with friends who are also fans. Much of my social interactions, particularly in primary and secondary school, revolved around consuming popular culture media, such as anime, at home and then discussing these with friends. At times I turned strangers into friends because we shared an interest in a particular genre of anime, a celebrity or music group. In this, I am not alone. I know from personal experience that other young persons of my age in South Africa and around the world also found friends and made friendships through the consumption of global popular culture.

In other cases, I was able to create friendships through mutual friends, shared interests and places I frequented. However, with the increased use of new technologies such as computers and mobile phones by young people, coupled with growing crime in cities and new forms of enclosure of private homes, fewer children in urban areas play outside after school and fewer adults participate in outdoor leisure activities. In Centurion, where I grew up, there were not many parks that were free to enter or that were within walking distance. Dhurup and Grobler (2012:422) conducted a survey on physical activity participation in a semi-urban area in southern Gauteng and found that the respondents have low participation in outdoor physical activities such as fishing, cycling and sports. The main form of physical activity that the survey

respondents reported was walking to and from work (Dhurup and Grobler, 2012:422). The respondents stated that in their neighbourhoods there is inadequate place for walking and cycling since the neighbourhood does not have sidewalks or cycling and pedestrian trails (Dhurup and Grobler, 2012:423). Therefore, with the changes, there were fewer public spaces wanted and used for children and adults to participate in activities such as games that help turn strangers into friends. This study resonates with my experiences growing up in Centurion. Of course, some spaces in Gauteng for individuals to participate in leisure activities such as walking and trail running, however during the COVID-19 pandemic, runners had to find ways to bring their hobbies indoors. De Vries and Gunter (2021) state that during the COVID-19 pandemic runners who typically would participate in social running events started hosting virtual running events. Scholars such as Heer (2017) and Nuttall (2004) note that shopping malls and markets are important sites for social interaction and leisure. Heer (2017) states that shopping malls in Johannesburg in particular can be considered to be an essential part of public life in urban areas. Similarly, in *Afropolis: From Johannesburg*, Nuttall and Mbembe (2007) display how individuals living in Johannesburg often visit public spaces to participate in leisure activities.

Modern gaming consoles and flat-screen televisions are examples of technologies designed to encourage indoor forms of leisure. Of course, there were ways for individuals to engage in indoor recreational activities without the use of technology. Leisure activities such as puzzle building and board games can be enjoyed without the use of computer technology. However, trading card games like *Yu-Gi-Oh!* required some assistance from audio-visual technology when it was first developed. What I mean by this is that to an extent, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* as a trading card game relied on children watching the anime on television to gain popularity. My first interaction with *Yu-Gi-Oh!* was on television when I was in primary school. After that, I saw other children at school playing with the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards I saw on television. From other children at school, I learned that the cards from the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* anime were available for purchase. Playing with the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards on the playground during primary school was one of the ways I made friends at school. The game has grown considerably since I was in primary school and it first aired on television in the early 2000s.

I was drawn to studying the relationships formed by anime fans as they bond over a common leisure interest. I initially set out to study the social interactions and

relationships between anime fans in Gauteng and I sought out to build on the research of Ramrathen (2016) from the University of KwaZulu Natal, whose master's dissertation illustrated how anime fans in South Africa bond over a shared interest. To study anime fans, I identified a store in Centurion where fans regularly meet. The store I identified was Dragon Town. I first heard of Dragon Town when I Googled "Comic book store Centurion". My first visit to Dragon Town was before I started my Masters degree, before I had chosen a topic. I visited the store a few times before I began fieldwork and was aware that some of the employees and customers of Dragon Town were anime fans. While compiling a research proposal I identified another store, Geek Home. I decided to research two stores to get a better idea of trading card game players in Gauteng at large, rather than just researching at one location. During the first month of conducting fieldwork, I realised that the staff and most customers at Dragon Town and Geek Home were more interested in trading card games than anime.

Most of the data that I subsequently made during fieldwork was related to social interactions, the use of physical space and leisure as a commodity that surrounded TCGs, not on anime as was planned. As a result, I changed the focus to studying social interactions between TCG players. The TCGs played by most players in Geek Home and Dragon Town were *Magic: the Gathering* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Changing the focus of the research meant forming a new research question around TCGs and TCG players. In the next section, I discuss the questions and concepts I used to guide me whilst conducting fieldwork.

## 1.2 Research questions

This dissertation presents ethnographical descriptions of places and encounters, as well as data from in-person interviews conducted with members of the trading card playing community. As such, this dissertation deals with leisure activities and kinship-making in commercial leisure spaces in the urban areas of Gauteng, South Africa. Anthropologists refer to commercial leisure spaces as privately-owned spaces in which persons can participate in leisure activities and purchase products used in leisure activities, products that are produced commercially. More specifically, this dissertation focuses on TCG stores in Gauteng as commercial leisure spaces that sell products used in leisure activities and primarily facilitate game-play and social interactions between players.

I chose to limit my research to two stores in Gauteng due to accessibility and financial constraints. Gauteng also has numerous TCG stores, like Dragon Town, that are well known across the country and globe. Some of the TCG players who come to Dragon Town are players who make special trips from other provinces. Furthermore, there are instances, which are documented in this research, of players who are visiting from other countries that come to play at stores like The Geek Home and Dragon Town. Thus, Gauteng proved itself to be an excellent and central location to conduct research because while I mostly made data about players in Gauteng, there was some insight in the wider reach of the games and the stores.

The primary research questions this dissertation seeks to answer is formulated as follows: How does commodified leisure such as trading card games contribute to the formation of social relationships among leisure participants in Gauteng, South Africa? I also posed a number of secondary questions which I tried to answer in this dissertation: What kinds of activities and social interaction take place at Dragon Town and Geek Home, the main field sites for this research? Who form part of the trading card playing community in Gauteng, or who are the main role players? What does it require to become a TCG player and how does one become a player? What kinds of social relationships are formed between individuals in the trading card playing community? What is the importance of hierarchies, exchanges, competition and reciprocity in the trading card playing community? How do players and customers relate to the privately-owned stores where field work was conducted?

I used these questions to formulate the objectives of my research. In answering these questions, I demonstrate the types of leisure activities that take place in TCG stores like Dragon Town and Geek Home, how kin and friendship relationships can be formed through serious and casual leisure activities. I also discuss TCGs as commercial leisure. To understand the relationships between TCG players I documented what it was like becoming a new *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* player. Becoming a new player meant, amongst others, learning how to play from individuals who were already players and buying cards. The process of learning how to play and learning how players buy and receive new cards revealed how players interact with one another.

### 1.3 Outline

This dissertation comprises nine chapters. Chapter Two provides background knowledge on *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and contextualises the games globally and locally. It situates the study within a broader global setting and indicates the scales to which *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* are played globally. The chapter also identifies how *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* entered South Africa and briefly discusses the interactions between South Africans and similar products. Furthermore, the familiarity that South Africans have with anime and collectable merchandise is discussed. Chapter Three provides additional contextual information relevant to South Africa (specifically Gauteng) and introduces the field sites where I conducted field research. Chapter Three lists and describes the research participants at Dragon Town and The Geek Home, as well as the physical aspects of the store environment, which aids in building an understanding of the dynamics within the stores. Chapter Four details the methodology used to collect in the field, as well as how to analyse it. Positionality, data collection methods, data analysis methods and ethical considerations taken are discussed in this chapter. Chapter Five analyses the available literature on kinship, leisure, and fandoms and discusses the intersections of these concepts. Chapter Six discusses TCGs as commodified serious leisure activities. This chapter illustrates that, while Dragon Town is a space for TCG players to participate in TCGs as a form of serious leisure. This chapter discusses the aspects of TCGs that have been commercialised, ranging from the accessories available to commoditising the gaming experience. This chapter examines the ways in which cards, TCG accessories and tournaments function as commodities and discusses how these commodities are used by actors to create friend relationships between players, employees and regulars. Chapter Seven discusses the casual leisure activities that take place at Dragon Town. This chapter also discusses the casual leisure activities that employees, customers and players participate in at Dragon Town and then discusses how the boundaries between work and leisure are blurred in TCG spaces like Dragon Town and The Geek Home. Lastly, Chapter Eight concludes the dissertation. This chapter summarises the arguments made in this dissertation and provides recommendations for further research.

## 2. Chapter Two: Contextualising TCGs globally and locally

This dissertation is concerned with an anthropological analysis of the leisure involved in becoming a player of Trading Card Games in Gauteng, the spaces in which face-to-face playing, exchanges and interactions occur, and the relationships that formed as a result. Wulf (2022:1) defined games as voluntary actions with goals and which differ from actions in the normal everyday world. Anthropologists such as Krel and Đorđević Crnobrnja (2020) and Wulf (2022), all of whom studied games and play, emphasise in their analysis of games how play generates social relationships. Trading Card Games are typically described as two-player card games in which the players must assemble decks from a variety of cards (Hau, et al., 2012). The official *Yu-Gi-Oh!* website defines TCGs as “a unique product that encourages interaction and socialisation between the people who play it. Unlike a board game or video game which begins and ends in one box, TCGs are constantly changing, adding new and exciting content” (Anon., 2023). As mentioned already, the two Trading Card Games featured in this dissertation are *Magic: The Gathering* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. The aim of this section is to provide information on the global and local contexts for TCGs (particularly *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!*) and focuses on the corporate background of the respective TCGs. This is followed by a discussion on how *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* were introduced to South Africa and how South Africans then and now gather around the respective TCGs for a variety of reasons and with multiple consequences.

### 2.1 *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic* as transnational media in South Africa

*Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic* originate in Japan and America respectively, but are played internationally. After the Second World War, Japan’s cultural industry played an increasingly large role in the global perceptions of the country after the country’s collaboration with the fascist regimes of Germany and Italy (Van Stand, 2013:35). Japanese cultural exports included fashion, anime, comic books and gaming (Van Stand, 2013). Amongst the Japanese cultural exports were the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* anime and card games. KONAMI’s distribution of their products outside of Japan started with exporting arcade gaming and casino gaming machines to Australia and the United States. Eventually, in the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* products to Australia and the United States, included the rights to air episodes of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* on local television between 1998 and 1999. These episodes were made in Japan at Toei Animation studios. KONAMI’s gaming and distribution licence was granted in 1999 in Gauteng, in 2000 in

Mpumalanga, and in 2004 in the Western Cape. It is unclear how the distribution rights were granted in the 2000s.

What is known, however, is why the South African government and SABC would have been interested in airing an anime like *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. During the apartheid era, South Africa and Japan kept good international relations. South Africa maintained their Consulate-General in Tokyo throughout apartheid and gave Japanese nationals in South Africa a superior status to other Asians, which led some South African newspapers to refer to Japanese people as “Honorary Whites” (Kawasaki, 2001). South Africa imported Japanese commodities, including television shows, despite international sanctions. Van Staden (2018:176) noted that Japanese-made anime was broadcasted on South African television as early as the 1980s, soon after the launch of television in South Africa in 1976. The National Party was in government at that time and exercised strict control over the national broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). Imported anime television was dubbed into Afrikaans to fulfil the bilingual broadcasting requirements of the then SABC (Van Staden, 2014). The 1995 language policy, known as the bilingual requirement, stipulated that the SABC should broadcast television and radio programmes in both Afrikaans and English throughout the apartheid era, the 1995 policy is also the most relevant version of this policy for the purposes of this project (Du Plessis, 2006). The bilingual requirement was later updated in 2004 and required the SABC to have a multilingual approach to broadcasting (Du Plessis, 2006).

Japanese-made anime continued to air on national television in post-apartheid South Africa. Jacobs, like other South African fans of Japanese anime, recalled watching anime such as *Dragon Ball Z*, *Pokémon*, *Naruto Shippuden*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *One Piece* and *Bleach*, shows which began to air on the free national broadcaster SABC 2 in the early 2000s at 17:00 on weekdays. Jacobs (2020) stated that the anime broadcasted on SABC 2 were targeted at, and consumed mainly by, school-going youth.

Anime News Network recently reported that the SABC had an average of 30 million South African viewers a month over analogue and Digital Terrestrial Television/Transmission (DDT) networks (this excluded the viewers on DStv and other digital satellite programmes) (Anime News Network, 2024). It is likely that it was via

the SABC, specifically SABC 2, that many South Africans first encountered Japanese anime, including *Yu-Gi-Oh!* (Jacobs, 2023).

The demand for *Yu-Gi-Oh!* products in South Africa increased since its initial airing and this demand was acknowledged recently by the programme manager of the SABC, Violet Sekhibidu, who stated that SABC recognised that there is a strong fan base for *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and its ancillary merchandise (Licensing Magazine, 2024). Sekhibidu's comment was made at the announcement that two new series from the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* the anime franchise will start broadcasting on SABC. The announcement that the SABC would be airing 270 episodes of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* was made in 2020 by Kristen Gray, the General Manager, Senior Vice President of Operations and Business & Legal Affairs of Konami Cross Media NY, Inc., who acknowledges that broadcasting *Yu-Gi-Oh!* on SABC is a means of “engaging” with South African fans of the franchise (Licensing Magazine, 2024).

Watching Japanese-made anime on national television is probably one of the first ways South Africans interacted with the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* franchise. This laid the groundwork for South Africans' interest in participating in the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Trading Card Games and fan merchandise, similar to South Africans' interest in the *Pokémon* franchise and *Pokémon* fan products or accessories. Some scholars and journalists suggest the global popularity of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* resulted from the global popularity of the *Pokémon* franchise in that the latter paved the way. One such author, Mizuko Ito (2005), argued that *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is an example of a type of “media mix” that was pioneered by *Pokémon*. According to Ito (2005:88), the term “media mix” describes the variety of media platforms that can be used to engage with the *Pokémon* franchise, which began as an anime and manga and eventually evolved into a video game.

Aside from the anime, one of the first interactions South African anime fans had with the *Pokémon* franchise was through Tazos. *Pokémon* Tazos were first released in 1999 as promotional items for Frito-Lay, a potato chip brand (Tazos, 2024). Some South Africans recall collecting the *Pokémon* Tazos in bags of Simba chips; the *Pokémon* Tazos were the first Tazos South Africans could own (Rennie, 2010). Collecting Tazos became an active process for some young South Africans. One such South African recalls buying bags of Simba chips, including flavours they were not fond of, just to find a *Pokémon* Tazo they did not already have in their collection

(Rennie, 2010). While *Pokémon* pioneered this type of media mix, which contains both anime and a playable game based on the anime, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* eventually overtook *Pokémon* in terms of global popularity (Ito, 2005:88). Subsequently, *Pokémon* Tazos were phased out and the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Tazos started to appear in Simba chip packets in 2004 (Tazos, 2024), signifying the growing popularity of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* in South Africa.

A South African anime fan, Ramrathen (2016) wrote that she recalls collecting Tazos and trading cards with her friends and cousins. Keeping the Tazos and cards in a good condition was important to collectors, as cards were not just for collection purposes but also to play with and trade (Ramrathen, 2016:59). In Ramrathen's (2016) dissertation, she noted that during field research in 2015, she encountered anime fans who kept the *Pokémon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Tazo collections they accumulated as teens, and some of the research participants had started collecting *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards. It is perhaps important to note here that acquiring a deck of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards today is not difficult if you have the money to pay for it. Solarpop is the local distributor of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards and various other card and board games. However, Solarpop does not sell their products directly to the public (Solarpop, 2024). Instead, those interested in purchasing *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards or other Solarpop products must find a store or go online. Solarpop and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* both have store locators on their websites.

Returning to the brief discussion on the presence of anime during and after apartheid illustrates that South Africans have been exposed to anime since the 1980s at latest. South Africans are familiar with anime and collecting items related to anime. More specifically, South Africans are familiar with *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and there is a demand for *Yu-Gi-Oh!* products in South Africa. Analysing the interactions South Africans had with *Yu-Gi-Oh!* in particular suggests potential characteristics of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* product consumers. For example, considering that *Yu-Gi-Oh!* was first published in *Weekly Shonen Jump*, a magazine and genre with young boys as its target market, it is safe to assume that perhaps a larger portion of the fans and players of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* will be boys and men. Additionally, some *Yu-Gi-Oh!* fans and players can be estimated to range from 10 to 40 years of age, as *Yu-Gi-Oh!* started airing in the early 2000s in South Africa and the SABC was targeting school-going youth.

## 2.2 The scale of *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!*

Many scholars who have written about *Magic* state that it can be considered one of the first TCGs (Dodge, 2018). However, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is not only a TCG but also an anime and manga. Based on the scholarly literature available, manga can be described as a popular culture product and a Japanese comic with a distinctive art style, often made to appeal to children (Toku, 2001). Rayna Denison (2015:1) defined anime as Japanese animated movies and television, while also admitting that this definition is an oversimplification. A more descriptive definition of anime is that it is “a form of cinematic medium found in Japanese culture. Anime typically stylizes human characters into an exaggerated convention that is artistically and emotionally striking compared to traditional animation” (Anime Tide, 2021).

Under the ‘Frequently Asked’ tab on the official *Yu-Gi-Oh!* website it is stated that *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is a popular children’s franchise based on a universe in which characters challenge one another to a strategy-based card game to gain honour, settle arguments and protect their loved ones (Anon., 2023). Furthermore, the official *Yu-Gi-Oh!* website states that *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is for children who are “interested in the anime, manga, card games or video games” (Anon., 2023).

*Yu-Gi-Oh!* first appeared in 1996 in *Weekly Shonen Jump*, a famous Japanese magazine known for publishing other popular manga such as *Dragon Ball*, *One Piece* and *Naruto* (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). *Weekly Shonen Jump* is a weekly shonen-focused magazine released by the Japanese publishing company Shueisha (Jump Database, 2024). Shonen is a type of manga that was intended primarily for boys (Drummond-Mathews, 2010). Notably, Shueisha is also the one of the three owners of Viz Media (Viz Media, 2024). Viz Media claims to be the leading publisher and distributor of Japanese manga for English-speaking audiences in North America, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and South Africa (Viz Media, 2024). The prominence of companies like Shueisha undoubtedly aided in the growth and popularity of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* through financial investment and marketing.

Shueisha is one of a few big corporations that aided the development of games like *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. The Konami Group Corporation, also known as KONAMI, is another company that played a significant role in the creation and development of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* as an augmented TCG. The popularity of the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* manga among young

readers led to it being bought by the Konami Group Corporation (CGC Cards, 2024). The Konami Group Corporation is a Japanese multinational company that specialises in entertainment and video game development. While the Konami Group Corporation is a Japanese company, many of its subsidiaries are based in other countries, most notably in Australia and the United States. The Konami Group Corporation initially manufactured “amusement machines” for arcades in 1969 and overtime expanded their business to include the manufacturing of casino machines, creating PC (personal computer) games and owning various sporting event venues in Japan (Konami Group Corporation, 2024). Through their various business ventures and available products, The Konami Group Corporation started to export their products, in the early 2000s, to countries such as the United States and Australia. The subsidiary Konami of America was established to do business in the USA, Konami GmbH was incorporated in Germany, and several other international companies were formed in jurisdictions across the globe. As of 2023, KONAMI owns gaming licences and distribution rights in 424 locations worldwide (Konami Group Corporation, 2024). According to a peer analysis performed by other Japan-based companies between December 2023 and June 2024, the reported yearly revenue of the Konami Group Corporation is approximately 360 billion Japanese Yen (approximately 2.2 billion US dollars) (Financial Times, 2024). As is the case with *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *Magic* is owned and supported by a prominent company in gaming making and game development.

What we now know today as *Magic: The Gathering* was originally named *Five Magics* and was first created by Richard Garfield in 1982 (Garfield, 2024). Richard Garfield created *Magic: The Gathering* when he was studying mathematics at university (Majuri, 2023). Garfield (2024) suggested that *Magic* was released due to demand for a game that could be played quickly and with minimal equipment. The development of *Magic* was supported and eventually released by Wizards of the Coast; a subsidiary of Hasbro Incorporated. Wizards of the Coast owns the licence for *Magic: The Gathering*, *Magic: The Gathering Arena* (a digital game) and various other board and card games (Wizards of the Coast, 2024).

Hasbro Incorporated is an American toy company. Notable brands owned and distributed by Hasbro Incorporated include *Magic: The Gathering*, *Dungeons and Dragons*, *NERF*, *Transformers*, *Peppa Pig* and *Play-Doh* (Habro, Inc, 2024). Hasbro, Inc is reported to have a revenue of 5.86 billion US in 2024 and its subsidiary, Wizards

of the Coast, has a reported revenue of 5.9 billion US dollars (Zippia, 2024). The size and success of Hasbro Incorporated, Wizards of the Coast and the game *Magic* are reflected in their respective revenue streams. Additionally, Wizards of the Coast and Hasbro Incorporated's earnings demonstrate the resources they have available to market and grow *Magic*.

Wizards of the Coast and Hasbro Incorporated are constantly releasing new versions of the game. Majuri (2023:12) states that Wizards of the Coast were able to use the malleability of Garfield's original idea to attract a wide variety of players. One of the ways in which Wizards of the Coast is able to do this is by including specialised decks from various existing franchises and brands from popular culture, such as the *Lord of the Rings* novels and movies. Fans and journalists reporting on *Magic* speculated that the *Lord of the Rings: Tales of Middle-earth Magic* card set made up roughly 60% of Hasbro's Q2 revenue in 2023 (Hicks, 2024). This indicates a high demand for collaboration with large brands and franchises from popular culture.

While the revenue of both Konami and Hasbro can indicate how many products have been sold, the revenue does not give an indication of how many TCG players or card collectors there are globally. In some ways, this would be impossible to measure. There has, however, been speculation by journalists and players alike on the true number of *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players, but there is conflicting data regarding the number of active players.

The numbers of overall and active players of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* are not stated by Konami. Websites such as Steam, which distribute and track the distribution of video games, perform an ongoing analysis of their concurrent players. In June 2024, Steam reported an average of 19,340 players and a peak of 41,735 players of the digital *Yu-Gi-Oh! game Yu-Gi-Oh! Master Duel* (Steam, 2024). According to Steam, both the average number of players and the peak number of players increased from May to June analysis (Steam, 2024).

In a 2014 study, Pawlicki et al (2012:1) claimed that there were over 12 million *Magic* players globally. The Hasbro website claims that there are over 50 million *Magic* players globally and 10 million players registered to *Magic Arena* (Hasbro. Inc, 2024). Rich Stein, a writer and CEO of the online magazine *Hipsters of the Coast*, which focuses on trends in *Magic*, questioned whether the millions of players Hasbro refers

to are regular players, individuals who have played *Magic* once in their life or card collectors (Stein, 2016). While it is impossible to verify these claims, it does suggest that Hasbro is able to estimate the number of *Magic* players through not only their sales but also online registrations to the mobile game. There are a number of inactive players, card collectors and infrequent players of both TCGs globally. one of those 10 million registered *Magic Arena* players and the owner of two *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Decks, but does not play *Magic Arena* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!*

### 3. Chapter Three: Field sites and research participants

This chapter provides descriptions of the field sites and introduces research participants. During fieldwork, I interviewed research participants at Dragon Town and The Geek Home but, on occasion, I would be invited to other stores and events by the players at Dragon Town and The Geek Home. Participant observation was mainly conducted at Dragon Town and The Geek Home. Since Dragon Town and The Geek Home are the two main locations where I made data, I will describe them as key sites for interactions, exchanges, activities and forming relationships.

In Gauteng, the two stores at which research was conducted are Dragon Town and The Geek Home. Dragon Town and The Geek Home are separate stores with no affiliations to one another and are both located in Gauteng. Both Dragon Town and The Geek Home primarily sell TCG cards, TCG-related products and board games. However, they are both commercial leisure spaces and thus also buy TCG cards and host and organise TCG events for *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. While Dragon Town and The Geek Home can appear similar due to the nature of their business, they are quite different in ways that will become apparent. The social actors I interacted with in Dragon Town and The Geek Home include employees who work for the stores, players who visit the stores to play games, and customers who buy commodities at the stores and who may or may not be players as well. The location and layout and interior of the stores differ from each other, naturally, but does the kind of leisure that takes place inside and to some extent the customers and players that frequent each. This section starts with a description of the research participants at Dragon Town, followed by a description of Dragon Town. Thereafter, I describe the research participants I worked with at The Geek Home and then describe the location and layout and interior setup of The Geek Home. I offer these descriptions in an effort to

communicate important aspects of the context that is the field site but also to show how the material environment both limits and creates opportunities for social interaction and the making of social relationships. The descriptions of the research participants include their races, which is common practice in academic research produces in the context of South Africa. In colonial and apartheid South Africa, the state produced multiple racial categories, including “White”, “Native” and “Coloured” with “Indian” as a subcategory of “Coloured” (Erasmus 2012:1). The category “Native” were later changed to “Bantu” and now commonly refer to “Black” (Erasmus 2012:1). These categories are still used in post-apartheid South Africa by the state but also as racial identities by South Africans. Erasmus (2012:9) notes that most, not all, individuals who are considered to be “White” have at least three generations of tertiary education in their families, unlike “Black”, “Coloured” and “Indian” South Africans. While racialisation and racial categories are not a focus on this research, these terms are used here to offer contextual information to add to the study.

### 3.1 The research participants at Dragon Town

At Dragon Town, the research participants I worked with include Shiven, Kyeron, Zoey, Ruan, Armand, Lee, Aaron, Jeanre, Lwandile, Adrian, Gerald and Joe. Shiven, Kyeron, Zoey, Jeanre, Lwandile and Adrian are all employees of Dragon Town and Joe is the owner. Aside from the employees, who all agreed to be interviewed, Gerald, Aaron, Ruan, Armand and Lee are individuals I met at Dragon Town who over the course of field work agreed to participate in interviews. Lee is not formally employed at Dragon Town but he is the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournament organiser and as such occupy an important position in this community. Gerald, Aaron, Ruan and Armand are players who are frequently at the store. The owner of Dragon Town, Joe, is a 60-year-old white man and is one of the first sellers of *Magic* cards in South Africa. Joe started playing *Magic* in the early 1990s, shortly after its release and started selling *Magic* in 1995 at a flea market in Hatfield. Joe is a casual *Magic* player and former *Dungeons and Dragons* player. Joe started and stopped playing various TCGs over the years, but continued with *Magic* throughout this time. After several years, Joe and his wife stopped selling *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards at flea markets and started Dragon Town to give TCG players a place to gather and play. I think most TCG players in Gauteng, including players who are not regulars at Dragon Town, are familiar with Joe because of how long he has been involved with the distribution of cards and board games. He

maintains a friendly relationship with the players and non-playing regulars of Dragon Town and often engages in games of Commander with them on weekdays and weekends.

Shiven (Shiv), a 30-year-old Indian man, is the manager of Dragon Town and a TCG player. Shiv plays *MGT*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *Pokémon* and *One Piece* and used to play *MGT* and *Pokémon* in a competitive capacity. He acts as an official judge for *Pokémon* and has the knowledge and ability to make judging decisions for *MTG* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. He has worked at Dragon Town for seven years as a permanent employee and has been playing TCGs for eighteen years. Due to his proximity to TCGs and TCG players, Shiv is well-informed and well-acquainted with the happenings and intricacies of TCGs and the spaces where TCGs are played. He is a senior figure in the local community of players.

Kyeron is a 19-year-old white man and an employee of Dragon Town. Kyeron's job requires him to pack orders and sort cards. Kyeron has been a *Magic* player for approximately 10 years; he started quite young! He is a high-ranking competitive Duel Commander *Magic* player and frequently participates in local and national tournaments. Kyeron started playing *Pokémon* but soon lost interest in the game and is now strictly a *Magic* player. The formats Kyeron plays are Commander (a casual format) and Duel Commander, Pioneer and Standard (which are all competitive formats). He learnt how to play *Magic* from other players at Dragon Town and was a weekend regular before he became an employee there. While Kyeron has been playing *Magic* for a number of years, he makes an effort to separate his life as a *Magic* player from his personal life. To separate his interests in *Magic* from his other interests he does not typically disclose his interest in *Magic* to his friends from school or extended family members.

Zoey is a 19-year-old black woman and former employee of Dragon Town. Zoey was one of the two women employees of Dragon Town. Before working at Dragon Town, Zoey stated that she had no knowledge or interest in any TCGs. Zoey's role as an employee of Dragon Town required her to pack orders, sort cards and help customers. Zoey was able to make predictions about customers and was in a unique position to make observations about customers, regulars and non-player regulars. Zoey is an outsider to the playing community who, through her job, was able to act as a regular

and gain insight into the intricacies of TCG players and non-player regulars of Dragon Town.

Adrian is a 26-year-old white man, casual *Magic* player and former employee of Dragon Town. He moved overseas while I was conducting fieldwork for this dissertation. Prior to this, he was a weekend regular at Dragon Town and often spent Friday nights, Saturdays and Sundays at Dragon Town. Adrian was the first person to attempt to teach me how to play *Magic*.

Ruan and Armand are 33-year-old white men who are regulars at Dragon Town. It is easier to speak about them as a unit because they would always appear at Dragon Town together and leave together. Both of them play *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic* in a casual capacity. However, Ruan or Armand would seldom play *Yu-Gi-Oh!* or *Magic* when they were in Dragon Town. Ruan plays more often than Armand and can participate in *Yu-Gi-Oh!* events as a judge. Ruan and Armand are weekday regulars and would often be the only customers at Dragon Town on weekdays, when they could be found either at the playing tables near the wall, where they would plug their work laptops into the sockets, or at the back of Dragon Town in the kitchenette. When Ruan and Armand were not taking work calls, participating in online “Teams meetings” or simply working, Shiv would join them in a heated discussion about movies, internet memes and television series.

Lee, a 31-year-old white man, is the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournament organiser at Dragon Town and a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* judge. Lee is not an employee of Dragon Town and is not compensated financially for his role as tournament organiser. He has participated in local *Yu-Gi-Oh!* events as the tournament organiser at Dragon Town for approximately six years. It is difficult to say for how long Lee has been the tournament organiser because he took on this role over a long period and slowly took on more of the responsibilities of a tournament organiser.

Aaron is a 27-year-old coloured man and a competitive *Yu-Gi-Oh!* player. Aaron is a weekend regular at Dragon Town and participates in most Saturday tournaments at Dragon Town. In addition to his attendance and participation in tournaments at Dragon Town, he also attends and participates in Friday night *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournaments at The Geek Home. When Aaron is not at Friday night *Yu-Gi-Oh!* at The Geek Home, he is usually at Dragon Town creating decks for the next tournament. Aaron carries a

backpack that holds a minimum of three decks and a folder of cards. The folder he has in his backpack is used to trade cards and store new ones from OTS boosters he won during the tournament. He typically stores his cards or conducts trades after tournaments.

### 3.2 The store Dragon Town

Dragon Town is a store in an unassuming Centurion office park, just one turn off Jean Avenue. Dragon Town is located in a semi-industrial urban area, surrounded by houses and both franchise businesses and small businesses. The businesses on either side of Dragon Town are the Courier Guy and a stationary store. Dragon Town is also a kilometre away from flats, freestanding houses and a few primary and high schools in Centurion, including Hoërskool Zwartkop. Viewed from the outside, Dragon Town appears to be a small two-story sliver, but once inside it feels much bigger. This is due to the open-plan layout of the space. The big, shiny black metal gate is closed and unmoving, even on the windiest days. There is a small button that rings a bell. At one point in its long life, this button was white, but it has slowly turned beige. The white wall this button is screwed into is pristine and untouched, but not nearly as important as the bell it provides a home for.

The bell is used by employees, customers and players who want to enter Dragon Town. On a weekday, Lwandile will typically open the gate for whoever rings the bell. Lwandile is an employee with several duties at Dragon Town, despite her title of “sales assistant”. Lwandile makes sure to sit in the direct eyeline of the gate, on high alert, in an attempt to notice a customer before the bell is rung. Sitting in direct view of the gate is something Lwandile learnt from her little sister, Zoey, who worked at Dragon Town before her. Figure 1 is a photograph taken while sitting in the chair Zoey would typically sit in. On weekends, the gate is left open.



Figure 1: Zoey's view of the door

On the first few occasions I visited Dragon Town I was struck by how empty the room felt after entering through the gates. The tiles are beige, while the walls and ceiling are white. The plain colour palette makes the small room feel bigger than it is. To the right were colourful puzzles with images of beasts and beautiful natural scenery sitting on wooden shelves. Even the bright colours of these puzzles felt dulled by the emptiness of the room. The whimsical images on the boxes were almost overshadowed by what was situated opposite it. To the left of this room is a staircase used by employees and store regulars to go to the office area upstairs. Just past the lonely puzzles is another door.

On the top of the frame of the second door there is a sign “*Magic The Gathering*”. It is a silvery fan-made sign crafted with wood and metal. The sign was not there in the beginning of this fieldwork. I noticed it one day upon entering and asked Shiv, the store manager, about it. Shiv stated that it was gifted to the store by one of the frequent customers. According to Shiv, the customer is an artist and was commissioned to make the sign, but the customer did not pay for it. The sign has a wire tucked in behind it so that it can be plugged in to a power source. When the sign, seen in the photograph below, is plugged in the words “*Magic the Gathering*” are illuminated and surrounded by a red-orange halo.



Figure 2: The Gathering sign above the door (Vahed, 2023) Past the second door is what I consider the “true” Dragon Town because the second door is where players gather to play *YGO* and *MTG*. On the right is a tall cashier’s desk. On the cashier’s desk are clear Perspex containers holding various kinds of brightly coloured dice and booster packs for *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *Magic* and *Pokémon*. On the far end of the cashier’s table is a flat-screen TV that is mostly off during the week.



Figure 3: Cashier’s desk at Dragon Town (Vahed, 2024) On some days, Shiv or Kyeron will be downstairs, either behind the cashier’s desk (seen in Figure 3 above) or at one

of the long metal tables in conversation with Ruan, Armand or other customers who have chosen to sit for a while. Ruan, Armand and a few other persons, customers and TCG players frequently work remotely from Dragon Town during the week. Joe allows these individuals to use the Wi-Fi and electricity without compensation. When I walk into the Dragon Town building, I usually hear customers and players talking to one another or hear the sounds of someone watching a movie or listening to music, or in conversation in an online meeting.

In the open space, four rows of long metal communal tables with mismatched chairs have been positioned as the playing area. Each row has four tables, and each table has four chairs. The tables are adorned with mousepad-textured tablecloths. The tablecloths are big playmats with space and desert landscapes printed on them. TCG players use the big playmats for board and card games, placing their decks on the placemats. The tables are empty on weekdays when no games are being played. If a row of tables is occupied during the week it is the second row, where Zoey, Lwandile, Ruan and Armand usually sit right next to each other and work. While Zoey would quietly sort cards for Dragon Town with her headphones on listening to music, Ruan and Armand would make qhips at one another while working on their laptops. Ruan and Armand do not work for Dragon Town, but they do work from Dragon Town: their work-from-home arrangement with their employers has become work-from-Dragon-Town. Not all customers who frequent Dragon Town would be able to turn the space into their office. Ruan and Armand feel free to work from Dragon Town because they are close friends with Shiv, who comes down from his office on the second floor to make small talk with them every few hours. Joe, the owner of Dragon Town, says he does not mind anyone spending their day at the store and using it to socialize or work.

Ruan and Armand sit at the end of the second row, closest to the wall plugs. Plugged into the wall is a long white cord that connects to a big white multi-plug which Zoey, Ruan and Armand use to charge their laptops and phones. A metal fan is also plugged into the extension cord in summer. When the fan is plugged in, you can sometimes hear Zoey, Ruan and Armand bickering over which direction the fan is blowing in. The bickering never goes on for very long and usually concludes with a mutually beneficial decision: Shiv should get them another fan. At the back of the store, past the long rows of tables, is a small kitchenette that is available to everyone. The microwave in this kitchenette has been used and abused and, depending on the day, either cooks or

stores. During the week it boils water and warms leftovers. On Fridays, the microwave stores the warm braai meat and protects it from any flies.



Figure 4: Dragon Town's kitchenette (Vahed, 2024)

Dragon Town was where I learned that you only need a microwave and a pair of scissors to cook whatever it is you crave. On the wooden kitchen island customers, typically weekday regulars like Ruan and Armand, have shared bowls of noodles boiled in the microwave and eaten out of previously used cake containers. The kitchen island is an island in many different ways and acts as a place to gather and break away from work or group conversations. I look at the kitchen island as a mini vacation and it's the only table people eat at regularly. The cupboards of the kitchenette hold a strange mix of potions, including a massive bottle of communal Tabasco sauce that gets dabbed onto everything from sandwiches to sushi. Whatever hot sauces your heart desires can be found in these cupboards. Sauces can also be found in the filing cabinet upstairs or in the energy-drink fridge in the front of the store. The energy-drink fridge can also act as a group fridge: customers and weekday regulars are free to put their lunches in it, along with snacks brought for everyone to share.

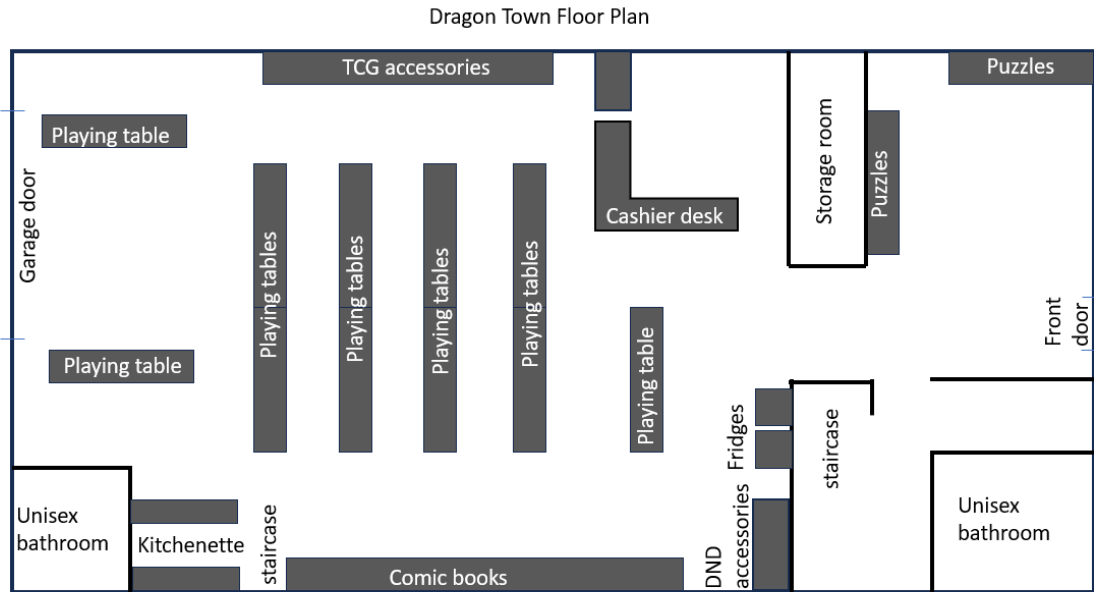


Figure 5: Floor plan of Dragon Town (Vahed, 2024)

Describing the physical aspects of Dragon Town and how the space is used provides insight into how a typical day of fieldwork was shaped by the material environment. This description provides insight into the dynamics between the research participants as these were shaped by the space itself and between the participants and the store. The casual and comfortable tone of the store is illustrated in this description.

### 3.3 Research participants at The Geek Home

The research participants I conducted interviews with at The Geek Home were Zander, Jordon, Casper, The Sir, Ryan and Ryan H. Zander and Jordon are employees of The Geek Home and Casper is the owner of the store. The Sir, Ryan and Ryan H are regular customers. The Sir asked that I not use his name or age and allowed me to choose an alias for him.

Zander is a 27-year-old white man who is a former manager of The Geek Home and the official *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournament organiser for The Geek Home. Zander was the manager of The Geek Home during the fieldwork and resigned from this position towards the end of it. He is a casual *Magic* player and competitive *Yu-Gi-Oh!* player. During *Yu-Gi-Oh!* local tournaments, Zander acts not only as the tournament organiser but also as a judge for *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournaments at the store and at national tournaments. He is also in the process of completing a course that allows him to act as a judge for competitive *Magic* tournaments. Zander's former managerial role, his

role as a tournament organiser, and his ability to act as a judge means that he is well-informed on the administrative and organisational elements of TCG tournaments, TCG rules and international TCG rules. Zander taught me and Jordon how to play *Yu-Gi-Oh!*

Jordon is a 26-year-old white man and an employee of The Geek Home. Jordon's main role is as a sales assistant. When I started my fieldwork, Jordon was new to *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and still in the process of learning to play. He is a casual *Yu-Gi-Oh!* player and helps Zander with administrative tasks on tournament days. Jordon's interests lie in anime, which is his connection to *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and TCGs. Jordon frequently participates in YouTube videos with Casper, a white male, to promote *Yu-Gi-Oh!* deck releases and upcoming sales. The customers, Ryan H and Ryan, are both 31-year-old men. Ryan is an Asian man and a regular *Magic* player at The Geek Home. Ryan plays competitive formats of *Magic* at The Geek Home on weekends. The formats Ryan typically plays are Legacy and Duel Commander, which are both popular at The Geek Home. Ryan H on the other hand is a white man who plays *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* in casual and competitive capacities. Ryan H is a semi-regular *Magic* player at The Geek Home and participates in the tournaments held there. On occasion, Ryan will attend tournaments at Dragon Town. He plays competitive formats of *Magic* like Legacy and Duel Commander, which are popular formats at The Geek Home. As Ryan is a competitive player, he will often travel to tournaments at various stores on the weekends.

### 3.4 Introducing The Geek Home

In this section, I describe what The Geek Home looks like and how the space is used. The Geek Home is a store situated in Moreleta Park, one of the larger suburbs on the eastern side of Pretoria. Moreleta Park is made up of a mixture of houses, small businesses such as barbers, large shopping malls, nursery schools and high schools. The Geek Home is located in a small open-air shopping centre in Moreleta Park.

When visiting The Geek Home, I typically chose to park my car close but not in front of the store. The shopping centre is quiet and quite plain to look at. The walls and tiles outside of the stores are both a warm shade of beige. Most of the stores in the shopping centre have one or two promotional Ultimate Guard posters in the window. The barbershop next to The Geek Home has a few pictures of different men's haircuts

and styles. The Geek Home's store window is filled with promotional posters for TCG accessory brands such as Dragon Guard. In winter, the glass doors of The Geek Home typically remain shut. There is a small "Open" sign that hangs on the right side of the double door.

Typically, on weekends, before entering The Geek Home, I bump into some of the players attending a *Magic* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournament or participating in a different game hosted at The Geek Home, such as *War Hammer* or *DND*. On weekends, there are two or three tables set up right outside of the store, against the wall. These tables are for *War Hammer*, *DND*, *Magic* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players to sit at if there were not enough seats inside for everyone. When I first entered The Geek Home, even whilst standing at the door, I was immediately struck by the black floor tiles and a wide variety of board games they had in stock. The dark tiles were a stark contrast to the brightly coloured pictures on the board games and the hanging *Pokémon* promotional decorations. The board games were on the shelves wrapped around the store, covering some of the wall on the right and the entire back wall.

Throughout fieldwork, I was astounded by the diverse collection of board games and often noticed a new board game title I hadn't seen before. The cashier's desk is a small, low metal desk with two plastic chairs. These two chairs are occupied by Jordon and Zander. Zander is the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournament organiser at The Geek Home and Jordon is a salesperson. Behind the cashier's desk is a metal shelf with *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards on it. Stuck onto the edge of one of the shelf levels is a piece of paper listing the cooldrinks and snacks for sale at The Geek Home. There is also a small fridge on the floor behind the cashier's desk. Directly next to the *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards are a shelf dedicated to card sleeves and card boxes.

On the left, there are two small rooms with single tables which are used by TCG players. Both rooms have shelves of store merchandise. Between the two doors of the rooms is a selection of mostly black shirts with characters from popular anime on them. There is also a sign printed on printer paper informing customers and players at the store of the WhatsApp groups for *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic* players. To me, the signs and stickers informing customers about the discounts and the WhatsApp groups made the store come across as an inviting space.

I typically walk through the store quickly to get to the back, where the TCG players gather. At some point during fieldwork, I forced myself to walk through the store slower to take note of all the merchandise at The Geek Home. Further into the store, after the cashier's desk, there was a shelf nearly as tall as I am stacked with comic books and another to the right of it which was stacked with Funko Pops. To my left, there were two tall metal shelves with peculiar shades of paint and small boxes with even smaller figurines inside. The paints and figurines are used for *War Hammer*. Promotional *Pokémon* cardboard figures hung from the ceiling throughout the store. There were also various discount stickers and signs on some of the shelves. When I do just quickly walk past all the shelves of the store, I turn left at the *War Hammer* shelves. Tucked away in the corner of the store are five metal tables dressed in red, green and black tablecloths. Each table has four chairs. These tables are allocated for *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players. Zander told me that the tables are the store's "primary focus". The doors to the storage room and kitchenette are usually closed. Generally, only Zander, Jordon and Casper go into those rooms.

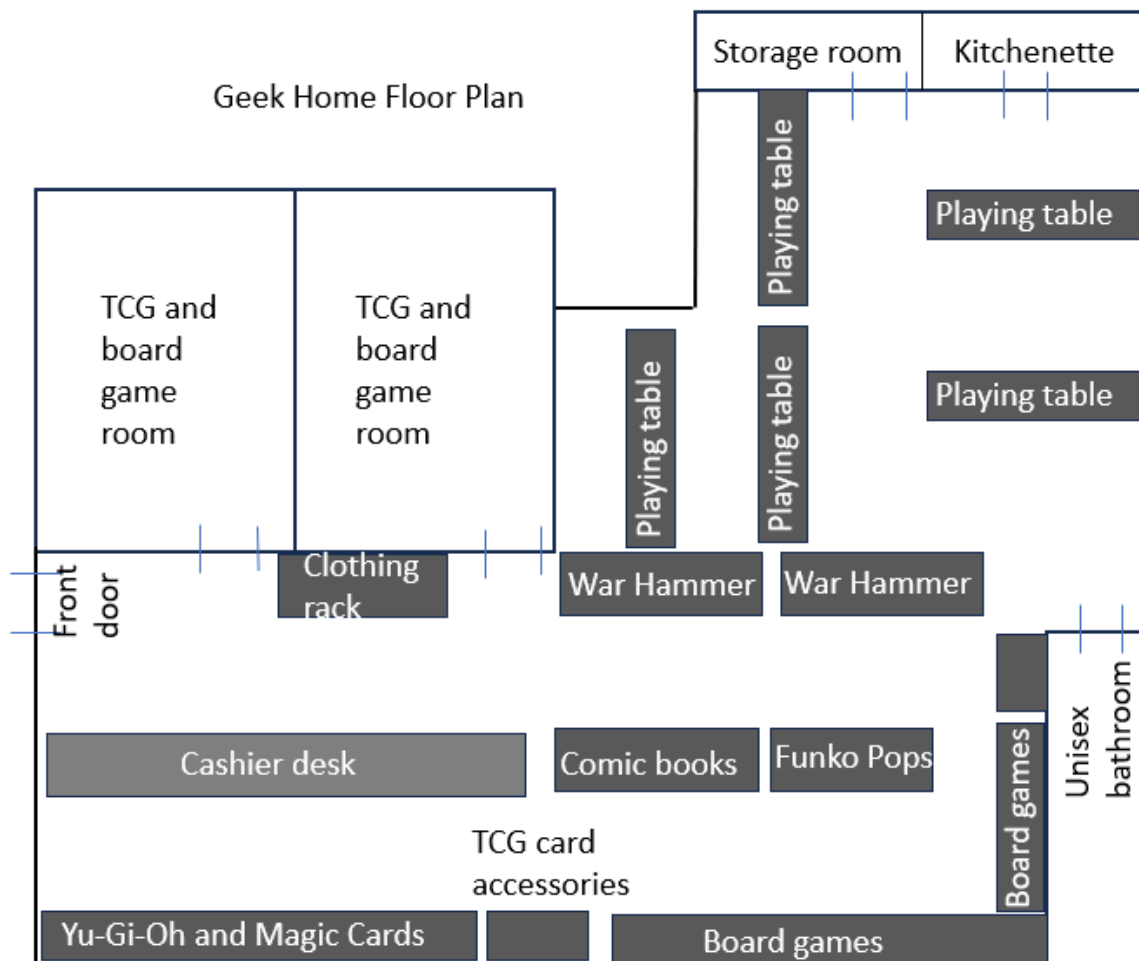


Figure 6: Floor plan of The Geek Home (Vahed, 2024)

### 3.5 What is a 'regular'?

I spent several weekdays and weekends at Dragon Town and found that there are individuals who could be considered “regulars” at Dragon Town who do not play TCGs. I first encountered the term “regular” in an interview with Jeanre and Zoey. Jeanre described Gerald as one of the “regulars” and then stated that “regulars are the best” when it comes to choosing pods to play with. Pods refer to groups of *Magic* players who regularly play with one another. The insider term “regular” stuck with me when I was analysing the data. In the context of this research, “regulars” refers to those individuals who regularly visit Dragon Town and Geek Home. I determined if an individual is a regular based on how often these individuals are at Dragon Town and what activities they are participating in the majority of the time there. Individuals who are regulars have met at least two of the criteria I have identified in the data. The first criterion is mandatory for all individuals to be considered a regular. The first

criterion that must be met is that individuals must have spent at least three weekdays at Dragon Town and/or attended at least half of the weekly *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournaments or Friday Night *Magic* evenings over the period of a month. In addition to the first criterion all regulars meet at least one of the other criteria which are as follows: a regular spends at least three hours at Dragon Town upon each visit, a regular participates in one of the leisure activities that take place at Dragon Town and lastly a regular will use both leisure and non-leisure allocated time at Dragon Town.

Regulars can then be split into two groups, namely “playing regulars” and “non-playing regulars”. Aaron serves as a good example of a playing regular. As previously mentioned in the chapter on entering the field, Aaron attends all weekly *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournaments at both Dragon Town and Geek Home, thus fulfilling both the mandatory criterion of a regular and the second criterion which is spending at least three hours at Dragon Town. Towards the end of fieldwork, I wanted to speak with Aaron to discuss an aspect of *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, before I went to Dragon Town I sent a message to Shiv over WhatsApp. I asked Shiv if he was working today, he replied that he is and when I asked if Aaron was also at Dragon Town he replied “Lol of course he’s here”.

Non-playing regulars on the other hand may fit better into the “amateur” category when it comes to leisure careers. I first came across “non-playing regulars” in fieldwork when I started spending weekdays at Dragon Town but I had not labelled them as that yet. Arriving at Dragon Town on a weekday during fieldwork I would be greeted by the same faces every time. Along with the weekday employees of Dragon Town I would typically find Ruan and Armand. As discussed above, Ruan and Armand are not the only individuals who come to Dragon Town to work during the week – the others did not consent to forming part of the research.

The distinction between non-playing regulars, playing regulars and customers is important because these terms demonstrate the extent and nature of social interactions in Dragon Town and Geek Home. The term customer is useful because it indicates that there is a transaction taking place between that individual and the store. It is important to consider some individuals as simply customers because notably, not all of the customers at Dragon Town and Geek Home are TCG players or regulars. Geek Home and Dragon Town both have customers who come in to buy non-TCG products, such as the customers at Dragon Town who come in to buy energy drinks.

Thus, the term customer can be indicative of the fact that a particular individual does not interact with others in the store in a playing capacity or on a regular basis.

### 3.6 Introducing *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic*

In TCGs like *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players must construct decks in order to play. *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* decks are not like the traditional 52-card playing card set commonly used in games like poker, go-fish or solitaire. In his thesis focusing on the therapeutic effect of *Magic*, Hauser (2020:54) states that *Magic* decks are dissimilar to 52-card playing card sets because players can construct their deck using any *Magic* cards they want to, instead of being given a fixed/set deck. Dodge (2018) notes that *Magic* is set in the Multiverse<sup>1</sup> which means the game has multiple themes and backgrounds. *Magic* players can construct decks using cards from the various *Magic* card sets and collections. Multiverse in *Magic* stems from the previously mentioned malleability of the game utilised by Wizards of the Coast and Hasbro to include various existing franchises and brands from popular culture such as the *Lord of the Rings* novels and movies. On the other hand, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* only uses characters and creatures set in the world of the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* universe. Thus, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players can only use *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards depicting creatures from the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* series.

Tieber and Felfening (2021:55) argue that ‘deck construction’ is an important skill when it comes to winning a game and that constructing a deck is a time-consuming and skill-intensive task. Dodge (2018) states that deck construction is an opportunity for players to express interests, use imagination and add a personal flair to the decks. Deck construction is strategic and creative. Players must use knowledge of the existing cards and find a way to construct what Tieber and Felfening (2021:57) describe as a “well-balanced and tuned deck”. My experience buying a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* deck was not a meticulous or well-thought-out action like some deck building is or could be.

I detailed my experience buying a deck in a diary entry:

06/05/2023 (Saturday) 10:44

I bought two decks for Yu-Gi-Oh! What a rush. I’m not sure why I did it, it was sort of impulsive. I had money, I wanted to spend the money and then I just got

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<sup>1</sup> The Multiverse refers to a hypothetical collection of diverse universes (Aguirre, 2024)

swept up in everything Zander was telling me about the game and how technical it is. It felt like something I should conquer.

It is customary to buy three of the same decks. I didn't buy three of this deck though because I have no intention of ever playing seriously in any way. The price of three also felt jarring to me when I wasn't going to play. I'm sure my gaming will begin and end with Aaron. Traptrix is about two months old and thus has more "support" than the other decks like New World which is five months old. It's insane how fast these things move. Five months isn't that long and yet the support is already dwindling? Support being cards and merch that accompany the theme.

Style, personal interest, nostalgia and how competitive you want to be helps you determine which deck to buy. Frankly, I chose this deck because of the art style and I don't have an interest in the lore of Yu-Gi-Oh! The dragon decks or the tech-looking decks weren't too appealing to me because I find the nostalgia a bit cringe. Probably because as a kid I used to be annoyed with the boys at my school running around saying things like "blue-eyed dragon, I summon you".

Somehow, I feel nervous about opening this box. I ran outside immediately after purchasing it. So that I can be alone with it somehow. It's currently on the plasticky tablecloth on the table outside. I'm trying to be careful. It feels like I'm opening a jewellery box filled with precious stones.

I slid the cards out so gingerly. This isn't the way I see others do it. But maybe you become numb to how precious these cards feel when it's not your only deck. Everyone else carelessly tears the box open, holds it upside down, lets the cards cover the table then scans through them at a lightning pace. Maybe that's another skill you get when you know the cards before they're in your hand and when you've handled cards for so long.

The cards are much smaller than I realized. Without the sleeves, they're tiny but not as soft as I thought they'd be.



Figure 7: Traptrix deck (Vahed, 2023)

My experience meant I didn't have to consider deck construction because the decks are themed and have cards that already work well together. In *Magic* cards are assigned colours and can be sold in a colour deck; the colour of the card determines the card's property (Elsam, 2020). The colours of *Magic* cards are black, red, blue, green, and white. Black cards represent power, death and sacrifice. Red cards represent freedom, action, and destruction. Blue cards represent knowledge, deceit, and caution. Green cards represent nature, spirituality, and wildlife. Finally, white cards represent peace, law, and equality (Fazio & Lacono, 2006, p. 2). These colours make up a colour wheel (see Figure 8). In this colour wheel, adjacent colours have similar ideologies and are known to be allies. The colour wheel includes enemy colours, enemy colours refer to colours that lie on opposite sides of the wheel and have opposite ideologies. Thus, when building a deck, you might be advised to build a deck with allied colours rather than comprising the deck with enemy colours. Allied colours have a better chance of working together against a common enemy.



Figure 8: Magic! Colour Wheel (MTG Fandom, n.d.)

Deck construction seems to be for more experienced and competitive players. Constructing a deck that is “well-balanced and tuned” is not an easy feat because of the many factors players must consider. However, players can use guidelines when conducting decks for both *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* In this section, I discuss the factors and guidelines of *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players take into account when constructing personalised, “strong” and creative decks. *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players must consider (1) the format of the game, (2) the level and capacity the deck will be used at, (3) the cards required to be in the deck according to the rules of the game and (4) the types of cards they will use.

*Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* both have various formats. Formats refer to how the game is played and the rules of the game. *Magic* has twenty-six formats and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* has four officially sanctioned formats and many fan-made formats (YGO Pro Deck, 2024). Each of the formats<sup>2</sup> for the respective TCGs has different rules players must adhere to. The officially sanctioned *Yu-Gi-Oh!* formats are Advanced Format, Traditional Format, Speed Duel and Common Charity. For the research, I will discuss the Advanced Format and the Traditional Format for *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and the Commander and

<sup>2</sup> The MTG formats are Commander, Booster Draft, Standard, Pioneer, Modern, Sealed Deck, Alchemy, Explorer, Historic, Timeless, Commander Draft, Pauper, Brawl, Conspiracy, Two-Headed Giant, Legacy, Vintage, Planechase, Archenemy, Archenemy Commander, Oathbreaker, Team Booster Draft, Team Sealed Deck, FreeForm, Momir Basic and Commander 1v1 (Magic: the Gathering, 2024)

Modern formats for *Magic* because these are the formats most of the research participants played.

The Advanced Format requires players to construct 40-60 card decks around the banned cards <sup>3</sup>(YGO Pro Deck, 2024). Zander told me that this was the most commonly played format and that I would be able to play this format at a casual level with my two decks. Players are also allowed an extra and side deck which both consist of 15 cards at most. In *Yu-Gi-Oh!* there is an official list of cards that are banned or sold as limited editions. The banned list is regularly updated by Konami on the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* website. The banned list consists of three categories, namely Forbidden cards, Limited cards and Semi-Limited cards. As of the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 2024, “Forbidden” cards cannot be used in a Main Deck, Extra Deck, or Side Deck of any player (KONAMI, 2024). A player may only have one Limited card and two Semi-Limited cards in their Main Deck, Extra Deck, or Side Deck. The reason some cards get banned or limited is that they can overpower other cards or be used with other cards to create a loop. A loop in this case could mean that the other player does not get the opportunity to make any more moves and thus will be defeated. The Traditional Format forgoes the Forbidden list and only applies the Limited and Semi-Limited lists to the gameplay (YGO Pro Deck, 2024). Both the Advanced Format and the Traditional Format are played at a competitive and casual level.

While *Yu-Gi-Oh!* operates on a more competitive level, and *Magic* has more social and casual formats. Commander is recognised by players to be a more social and casual format than the other formats of *Magic* (Eckard, 202, Shiven, 2023). The Commander format allows up to five players at a time and the games are much longer than other formats with more cards needed to play than other formats. Commander is also the format I was first encountered in the field and it is the first format I was introduced to by Adrian at Dragon Town. Typically, players start on 20 life and 60 cards in other formats of *Magic* but in Commander, players start on 40 life and 100 cards (Magic the Gathering, 2024). Since Commander players start with more life points and more cards than the other formats, players have more opportunities to attack their opponents during the game and there are more players to potentially attack. Furthermore, individual players are able to form alliances to attack other players.

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<sup>3</sup> Banned cards refer to cards that players are not *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players are not allowed to use in their decks because they can be overpowering when paired with other cards.

Commander is also the cheapest format making it much more accessible to new players who may not be willing or able to spend money on a deck or individual cards. One of the factors that make Commander more affordable is that in other *Magic* formats players may need four copies of a particular card, whereas in Commander players only need one additional copy. The four additional card copies are essential in other formats such as Standard, Pioneer and Modern which are more competitive formats. The first time I saw *Magic* players playing Standard and Modern was at Geek Home during a tournament. My initial impression was that Standard and Modern are more competitive formats because of the tournament setting and because of how quiet the players were during the game. Standard and Modern are played between two players and I found that this typically means that there is less conversation during the game, whereas in formats like Commander, there is constant chatter. While Commander tournaments took place during the time I spent in the field, Standard and Modern tournaments were certainly more common. Standard and Modern tournaments take place at Geek Home every week however Commander tournaments take place less frequently at both Geek Home and Dragon Town. To participate in *Magic* games and tournaments players often attend “Friday Night *Magic*”.

Friday Night *Magic* refers to the weekly tournaments that are held at various locations globally as a way to start a “*Magic* Community” (MTG Wiki, 2024). Friday Night *Magic* is considered to be the cornerstone of the “*Magic* Community” (Magic: the Gathering, 2024). The weekly tournaments are casual competitions designed to introduce new players to a competitive environment (Genoslugs, 2024). The tournaments are open to all players regardless of their skill level.

For commodity agent stores like Geek Home and Dragon Town to host tournaments, it must join the Wizards Play Network (WPN). Only the registered owner of a business can apply for a store/business to join the WPN (Wizards of the Coast, 2024). Stores must meet the basic requirements set by Wizards of the Coast to become a WPN and must go through an orientation period. After joining the WPN, stores gain access to the Wizards Events Link which is a WPN event management tool used by staff at stores to schedule, report and run events (Wizards Play Network, 2024). The Wizards Event Link monitors the store’s tournaments and other activities. The Wizards Event Link allows the store to keep track of scores, game times and penalties. Staff and employees of stores log events such as tournaments and *Magic Arena* tournaments

and the Wizards Event Link generates a code on the store's computer that is shared with the players so that the players at that store can use the code to enter the event. This system also informs Wizards of the Coast and the distributor of how many players are attending events at specific locations and helps inform them when prize boosters<sup>4</sup> must be sent to the stores. Players use the *Magic: the Gathering Companion* app on their mobile devices to enter the code for the event to enter (Wizards of the Coast, 2024).

Formats such as Standard can be played online on the *Magic Arena* app and rely on players building their decks to evolve the gameplay and strategies (Wizards of the Coast, 2024). Choosing between formats comes down to preferences and what the player seeks to get out of the game. Some players are looking for social interaction, some look for competition and others are there simply to play the game.

When a player constructs a deck according to the format they want to play, the player can choose from various types of cards. Players can choose from cards in their possession, buy new cards or trade cards with other players. Both *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* have different types of cards with different rarity levels which affect the strength of the card. In *Yu-Gi-Oh!* rarity affects the price, strength of a card and how the card looks. Cards come in 25 degrees of rarity<sup>5</sup>. This extensive list of rarity types does not include other rare cards that are not sold by stores. Cards that stores aren't permitted to sell are the Lost Art promotional cards and OTS Tournament Packs. Lost Art promotional packs and OTS Tournament Packs are promotional initiatives created by KONAMI to encourage Duelists to attend Official Tournaments, gather with other duelists and support the OTS (Anon., 2024). The Lost Art promotional cards<sup>6</sup> can be obtained by customers at an OTS after spending a certain amount of money. OTS Tournament Packs are exclusive prizes won during tournaments. Thus, participating

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<sup>4</sup> Prize boosters are small packs of three to five cards common and rare cards that stores provide players who have won tournaments.

<sup>5</sup> The degrees of rarity are as follows: Normal (N), Normal Rare (NR), Rare (R), Super Rare (SR), Holofoil Rare (HFR), Ultra Rare Secret Rare (ScR), Prismatic Secret Rare (PScR), Holographic Rare (HGR), Parallel Rare (PR), Ghost Rare (GR), Normal Parallel Rare (NPR), Parallel Rare (PR), Super Parallel Rare (SPR), Ultra Parallel Rare (UPR), Duel Terminal Normal Parallel Rare (DNPR), Duel Terminal Parallel Common (DPC), Duel Terminal Rare Parallel Rare (DRPR), Duel Terminal Super Parallel Rare (DSPR), Duel Terminal Ultra Parallel Rare (DUPR), Duel Terminal Secret Parallel Rare (DScPR), Gold Rare (GUR) (UR), and Ultimate Rare (UtR) (Locke, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Lost Art promotional cards are *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards which are distributed with the original artworks (Yu-Gi-Oh! Wiki, 2024). Cards are often censored for international markets to fit the age restriction rules of other countries such as the US.

in tournaments at an OTS is necessary for *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players who want exclusive products or rare cards to better their gameplay. It is important to note that there is a fee set by stores to participate in a tournament for both *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic*. Tournament fees are one of the ways Konami and Wizards of the Coast have commodified serious leisure activities. Tournaments encourage players to interact with one another and the exclusive prizes motivate players to return to the stores. During tournaments, players will often discuss their gameplay at great length with one another after a match.

## 4. Chapter Four: Research Methodology

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the research methods used to make data for this dissertation. It further provides a motivation and justification for the research approach, specifies the sample size and data sources, and discusses how data from the field was analysed. Ethical considerations taken while conducting fieldwork are explained, as well as my own positionality in the research. This is followed by a discussion on data collection methods, data analysis methods, and the limitations of the methodology and the data made.

I began fieldwork in May 2023 after obtaining permission from the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (see appendix B) and conducted field research over a period of eight months. Field research was conducted mainly on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays at Dragon Town and The Geek Home. I chose to alternate the weekends I spent at each site. I would only break this schedule if one of the sites was hosting an important or relevant event, such as a regional tournament or a gathering to watch a movie or television series. These locations were crucial to ‘the field’ in this project, which is why I went into length in the previous chapter providing contextual information about the stores.

Condry (2013:5), an anthropologist, stated that anthropologists should approach scholarly questions by attending to some of the nuances of social life and then use those details to develop larger theories. The nuances of social life are often only available to researchers through conducting participant observation. For this research project I found that the nuances pertain to the social interactions between TCG players and customers and the relationships they form amongst each other in the spaces of

leisure I describe with the aid of multiple objects and infrastructure. The trading cards - a commodity created by a transnational company - gathered the research participants in specific spaces. It was through paying attention to the nuances of social life as I learned to become a player and an insider that I was able to develop arguments about kin-making practices through leisure activities.

According to Google, there are approximately 20 stores that sell TCG cards in Gauteng (this does not include stores like Toy Kingdom and Toy R Us, which also sell TCGs). I chose to conduct research at Dragon Town and The Geek Home due to my familiarity and physical proximity to them.

#### 4.1 Ethical considerations

This research was developed in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria and the ethical guidelines and principles suggested by Anthropology Southern Africa (ASNA 2021). The initial interest and research question was on anime fans in Gauteng and identifying how anime fans participate in fan culture, particularly participatory culture as defined by Jenkins (1992). To study anime fans, I identified Dragon Town and The Geek Home as two locations where anime fans gather and interact with one another.

I was aware that there are anime fans in Gauteng and that some of those fans are children. The ethical guidelines and principles set by ASNA state that children, along with the elderly, disabled people and people who have been abused are considered to be vulnerable individuals and thus researchers must take the necessary precautions to not violate their rights (Anthropology Southern Africa, 2005;143). Zavisca (2007:130) stated that children, pensioners and impoverished people are considered vulnerable human subjects and must be protected from exploitation. I chose to exclude children from the research for two reasons. Firstly, Zavisca (2007:138) states that children are unable to give informed consent and researchers must obtain informed consent from the parent or guardian on behalf of the child. Secondly, in Zavisca's (2007) paper it is stated that she consulted with a professor of education who suggested that more harm can be done to a child if the researcher does not conduct covert research. The research I intended to conduct was not covert and thus I excluded children from the research.

The process of getting permission from Dragon Town and The Geek Home started with the presentation of a letter of invitation (Appendix A) to participate in this research. I gave these letters of invitation to the store owners in person and informed them that I would need a letter from each owner stating that they have permitted me to conduct research in the stores. I obtained consent from the store owners to conduct research in the respective stores (Appendix D) I also obtained consent from research participants (Appendix C). To obtain permission from individuals to participate in my research as research participants I presented individuals with letters of informed consent (Appendix B) and consent forms (Appendix C). Additionally, I explained the letter of informed consent to the store owners, employees and research participants thoroughly to ensure that they understood the research project and the roles of research participants. I tried to keep two copies of both the letter of informed consent and the consent forms in my bag every time I visited either of the stores. Store employees, customers and players were allowed to accept or decline participation in the research. All of the sales assistants at both Dragon Town and The Geek Home agreed to be research participants.

The other ethical factor considered was how data was made. Data making methods such as listening to gossip were vital to the research. Besnier (1996:26) discussed how he used gossip in his ethnographic research and states that there is a difference between gossip amongst research participants and ethnography-as-gossip. According to Besnier (1996), the difference between gossip amongst research participants and how ethnographers use gossip is that ethnographers make serious attempts to maintain the anonymity of the individuals being gossiped about. Bradley (2017:125) argued that gossip is essential to understanding how local people express and experience their daily concerns and views. Taking this into consideration I focused on maintaining the confidentiality of research participants and individuals who were gossiped about. Research participants were allowed to choose if their names were included in the dissertation or if they wanted to go by a pseudonym.

After obtaining approval from the university's ethics committee and the stores, I was allowed to start fieldwork. Before discussing how I conducted fieldwork, I will discuss my positionality.

## 4.2 My positionality

I grew up watching anime and hearing about TCGs. I grew up watching anime on SABC 2 and on DVDs that my older brother had. In primary school, many of my peers played with *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards and watched anime. On the playground in primary school, I spoke to my friends about the anime that was airing on SABC 2. My interest in anime has played a part in many parts of my life, such as who I make friends with, what I watch, the media I engage with and even how I dress.

How I dress is a big part of my identity and I found that the way I dress affected how I was seen in fieldwork. I am usually very mindful of how I am dressed because it is a way for me to express my interests. Thus, I make an effort to wear clothes that resemble the clothes of my favourite anime and media characters. In terms of how I dress, I try to resemble the women characters in my favourite anime: *Sailor Moon* and *Tokyo Mew Mew*. *Sailor Moon* tells the story of a teenage girl named Usagi Tsukino who meets a talking cat that grants her the ability to transform into Sailor Moon, guardian of love and justice (Takeuchi, n.d.). Similarly, *Tokyo Mew Mew* follows Ichigo Momomiya, a teenager who was injected with Iriomote cat DNA so that she can become a *Magical* girl who can save the world from aliens (My Anime List, n.d.). The main characters in *Sailor Moon* and *Tokyo Mew Mew* have similar styles of dress which mostly consist of short dresses/skirts and tight-fitted clothes. I consider the style of dress in *Sailor Moon* and *Tokyo Mew Mew* to be quite feminine.

I dress in a manner that I think is similar to the characters in *Sailor Moon* and *Tokyo Mew Mew* even when I go to Geek Home and Dragon Town. I am also attracted to alternative styles like punk and goth fashions and alter the *Sailor Moon* and *Tokyo Mew Mew* clothing styles accordingly. Dressing in a more feminine way made me feel very different from the mostly men TCG players and customers in The Geek Home and Dragon Town. Despite feeling separate from the TCG players and customers in The Geek Home and Dragon Town, many of them were welcoming to me. After introducing myself to Adrian's friends they immediately asked me if I was a *Magic* player. Similarly, Zander, Kyeron, Zoey and a few other customers and players asked me if I play *MTG* or *YGO*. Not being a player of either game also made me feel somewhat isolated but helped me make data on how players interact with non-players and newcomers to the respective TCGs. Not being a TCG player when I entered the field helped me build relationships with the individuals who taught me how to play.

Furthermore, being one of the new women and feminine dressing persons at Geek Home and Dragon Town helped me build a connection with other women in the stores, especially Zoey.

#### 4.3 Data collection methods

This research project makes use of qualitative data and qualitative data analysis to answer the research questions. Bernard (2012:451) stated that there are two distinct types of data, namely qualitative data and quantitative data, and two types of data analysis, namely qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis. Bernard (2012:415) further stated that qualitative data means interpreting texts and focusing on themes that emerge from the texts. In his book, Bernard (2012) identified participant observation and individual and group interviews as qualitative research methods commonly used by anthropologists to collect data. This research made use of participant observation, group and individual interviews, and textual analysis. Participant observation was conducted at the research sites by playing *Magic* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* with customers and employees of the stores. I was not a TCG player before I entered the field so research participants taught me how to play. Through participant observation, I was able to spend a lot of time with research participants and this taught me how TCG players, customers and non-players communicate and interact with one another in the leisure spaces. Furthermore, I was able to pick up the slang and terms used as well as everyday movements (Bernard, 2017).

At Dragon Town, *MTG* is played on Friday nights and Sundays, tournaments are held every Saturday, and *Dungeons and Dragons (DND)* is played throughout the weekend. The Geek Home had a different schedule, with *Yu-Gi-Oh!* on Friday nights and Sundays and *MTG* on Sundays. The Geek Home also reserved space for *War Hammer*, *Star Wars* and other board games. The customers and employees of these stores were mostly men between the ages of 18 and 70. While I tried to interact with as many players and employees as possible, there were twenty-three individuals with whom I interacted most frequently. These twenty-three individuals were selected as research participants. Six of these research participants were employees of either Dragon Town or The Geek Home and two were the owners of the respective stores. Weekends were used to conduct participant observations and interviews and, at times, to listen to talk and gossip.

Individual and group interviews that ranged from semi-structured to unstructured formats were used in this research. Forsey (2012) stated that interviews can create and capture insights with a depth of focus that can be difficult to achieve through surveys and observations. Some of these interviews, with the necessary consent, were recorded using a voice recorder and a voice-recording phone application and then transcribed. Themes from the interviews were identified and used as focal points for further analysis and development of the literature review. The interviews would often take place in the stores on weekdays, at empty playing tables or outside the research sites. On occasion, I would meet participants outside of the stores. I decided to take the measure of conducting some interviews outside of the stores so that research participants could speak freely about themselves, other players and playing spaces.

Writing up and organising findings gathered through interviews and participant observation included information about the ages and genders of participants and responses to interview questions. Where it was applicable, I documented the names and pseudonyms of research participants alongside responses. For respondents who wanted to remain anonymous, only the respondent's age and gender were recorded, with no other feature about the respondent that can make them easily identifiable being recorded. Group interviews tended to be more informative than individual interviews, as group interviews allowed me to observe how players interact with one another and it was an excellent opportunity for players to gossip.

Upon commencing fieldwork in May, I was already familiar with the TCGs, particularly *MTG* and *DND*. I had heard of *MTG* and *DND* from the movies and television serials I watched. I also knew a few of the employees and players already. I already knew some employees and players, including Shiv and Adrian, because I met them the first few times I went to Dragon Town before I started my fieldwork. Todne Thomas (2016:66) stated that there are several ways to frame ethnographic relationships and argues that the most prevalent way an ethnographer depicts themselves is as a participant-observer instead of as a stranger or a friend and that these personae are useful in understanding the ethnographer's community associations. Understanding the "community associations" amongst players and my community associations with players was a focal point in my fieldwork. According to Thomas, the relative distance

or closeness an ethnographer has to the research community determines their persona as either a “stranger”, “friend” or “researcher”.

In terms of this research, I had various personae since I was already familiar with some of the research participants. To research participants such as Shiv and Adrian, who I had met before entering the field, I was a “friend” but became a “researcher” once I started asking questions and interviewing them and other players. The first time I met Shiv and Adrian we got to know each other and spoke in a friendly manner. When we first met and spoke with Shiv, Adrian and I asked each other questions to find common interests. Our relationship changed a bit when I started fieldwork. At the beginning of fieldwork when I would enter Dragon Town on weekends, Shiv would greet me and point out players and customers I could speak to. After a few months of conducting research, my relationship with Shiv grew and we became friends. Shiv and I started talking to one another more when I came to Dragon Town. Instead of simply greeting each other verbally, we now hug and then share personal stories before I speak to customers and other players.

Despite the growing friendship with Shiv, it was clear to me when I was seen as a “friend” versus when I was a “researcher” by the way he and others answered questions and spoke to me. Players who I had met during fieldwork usually perceived me as a “researcher” unless they were one of the players teaching me about a TCG, then I was a friend who they could potentially play with in the future. Adrian is one of the players who taught me how to play *MTG*. Before I asked Adrian to teach me how to play *MTG* I would follow him while we were both in Dragon Town and sit next to him while he was playing *MTG* with his friends.

Having research participants teach me the particulars and intricacies of games as well as listening to them speak about one another was vital to making data for this dissertation. Knowing how to play TCGs allowed me to interact with players in-game settings and study the behaviours and interactions between players, customers and non-players. I had key four research participants who would introduce me to players and non-player regulars. These participants acted as gateways to the social networks within the stores and amongst players that went beyond the confines of the stores.

Participant observation was conducted on Friday afternoons and nights and Saturday and Sunday during the day as tournaments were held. I would often sit at the tables

with participating tournament players during the tournaments or stand behind them. I would make written fieldnotes on the activities in a notebook, paying attention to the physical setting and interactions between players and others. To build a rapport with players and become a “friend” I would sit with them during non-tournament games and play with a pod. Participating in games with players and putting away my notebook seemingly made players more at ease; thus, I would write notes after a game or on my way out of the store. When the games ended, an unstructured interview would be conducted with one of the pod members and notes were made during this time. Conducting unstructured interviews meant that I would have to remember any questions I had until I could pose them in a setting where I could accurately record the answer. I thus began conducting interviews with store employees during the week.

The interviews conducted with employees were used to answer questions and make additional fieldnotes. Through this process, I began to shadow the employees, particularly the employees of Dragon Town. Dewilde and Creese (2016:331) defined shadowing as following an individual while they do their daily tasks. To get consent to shadow an employee, the employee's consent to be a research participant was first obtained. If the employee at Dragon Town consented to being a research participant I arranged with Shiv and that particular employee when I could shadow them. Shadowing an employee at Dragon Town required becoming familiar with their weekly schedule and daily tasks and the weekly schedule of that employee. I would sometimes help Zoey with these tasks in small ways when not making fieldnotes.

Many conversations with Zoey and Shiv were held to confirm observations and were opportunities for Zoey and Shiv to share their observations. Shadowing often led to Zoey providing a “running commentary”, which not only allowed me to understand them holistically, but also contextualised their actions (McDonald, 2005:456-457 Dewilde and Creese (2016:329) stated that discursive shadowing involves putting the conversations between the researcher and the participants at the core of the analysis and studying the participants over a period of time utilizing participant observation and audio recordings. I used discursive shadowing to analyse the verbal and non-verbal interactions between Shiv and other employees and this became the bulk of my findings.

As mentioned earlier, Zoey is a former employee at Dragon Town that I considered shadowed during fieldwork. While I was conducting fieldwork, Zoey was 19 years old. She is a black woman from a middle-class background. My relationship with Zoey started as a researcher and research participant relationship. However, Zoey and I soon became friends. I would sometimes help Zoey pack orders for customers. I would cut strips of Sellotape for her or add the shipping address to the packaging and she carefully arranged and packed the cards. While we worked, we would talk about our perceptions of the customers. Zoey's perspectives were unique compared to other research participants because she was not a TCG player. Zoey and I bonded over the fact that we were the only women in Dragon Town on most days. Zoey and I would also often discuss things we didn't understand about TCG players and TCG games. Zoey's perspectives were valuable to me because I noticed that she was very observant and made note of the characteristics and habits of certain customers. An instance that highlights Zoey's close attention to detail is her last day at Dragon Town as an employee. On Zoey's last day, I sat next to her when she suddenly spoke and said "I bet you this guy is going to come in and just use the bathroom." It was Lwandile's first day and so she went to open the door and the man walked in and just used the bathroom. After a while, she predicted that a delivery man would come and that he would "buy a packet of NikNaks and a can of Switch". Zoey and I usually made remarks about the customers and TCG players that entered Dragon Town but, on this day, we had a spectator, her sister, Lwandile. Lwandile accused Zoey and I of gossiping about the customers but we informed her that there was something lonely about being the only women in Dragon Town and we spoke this way because we could relate to one another more at times than we could to the TCG players.

#### 4.4 Methods of data analysis

For this research, I made use of the functionalist and symbolic approaches to conversations and gossip. The functionalist approach to such everyday talk illustrated by Gluckman (1963), shows that it is an important function in group settings and can help maintain unity, morality and history, while the symbolic approach notes that it can be used to understand and map out social happenings (Barnard & Spencer, 2002, pp. 337-338). The data gathered from network research through conversations illustrated the behavioural and attitudinal positions of individuals and the groups at respective stores at large (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 130).

Spatial mapping was a vital aspect of fieldwork. During fieldwork spatial mapping included the stores themselves, the way the stores looked, where movable objects were placed and, of course, the objects inside the store. To document these items, I took pictures that were used in the introduction of this dissertation and made notes describing the setting in as much detail as possible. These would include short descriptions of the setting whilst in the store every two to three months to keep a record of how the spaces change. I then analysed the pictures of the stores to elicit themes and meanings. Taking pictures and making notes of these objects was important to the research because spatial mapping provides context to the descriptions of ethnographic sites (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999: 129).

The methods employed during fieldwork meant that I was writing most of the observations down in a notebook. This is the same method used by Mughal (2015), who discussed 'anthropology at home' and stated that, when collecting data, he took notes in real time during conversations and, when writing was not feasible, would use a digital voice recorder to take notes of observations and relevant terms in his voice (Mughal, 2015:128). I employed Mughal's (2015) method of recording observations on a digital voice recorder during fieldwork when unable to articulate thoughts in a concise sentence or when I had an idea related to my written notes but could not write it down. Fieldnotes were written in a notebook that I took with me every time I visited my research site. I mainly used "field jottings" to write real-time fieldnotes. Bernard (2012) stated that field jottings are words and short phrases used by researchers to trigger their memories when they write more detailed fieldnotes at a later time. I used field jottings to make note of the exact words research participants would use in conversations and interviews. I also used diary entries as a way to document observations. Diary entries are more personal and illustrate the researcher's perceived relationships, and were also used to document observations. I used diary entries to document how I felt after an activity typically done by TCG players, such as buying a deck of cards or going to a tournament. A method described by Mughal (2015), who suggested that notes should be arranged thematically, was also used to organise fieldnotes. I used textual analysis to code the fieldnotes after the first month of fieldwork. There were themes that I initially identified that changed over time as the fieldwork continued and I made new data.

#### 4.5 Limitations to the research

While this study achieves an understanding of kin making among TCG players, it only includes a small part of the community, focusing on TCG players who participate in tournaments and weekly games but unable to access players who choose not to come to these stores. Even if these players do not interact with other players in stores or communal spaces in pods or tournaments, they are still important and known parts of the community. Many of these players who do not play TCGs in the types of spaces in this research are women, meaning that the perspectives from women on the community is limited.

The other limitation of this research is the predominant focus on physical spaces and in-person interactions. Many TCG players have an online presence, mainly through WhatsApp group chats, Facebook pages and YouTube videos. The main purpose of these platforms is for players to stay informed and updated on tournament dates and other events. Players invited me to the group chats and informed me about their YouTube videos. These platforms often focus on the players' opinions on new deck releases, merchandise or other products. At the time I did not find much value pertinent to this research in these platforms thus, they were neglected to a large extent. On rare occasions, I would scan the WhatsApp group chat and find players talking about an event or scandal within the community and it would pique my interest. However, once I was at one of the stores the scandal or story would be told to me in a gossip session and thus, I progressively neglected to monitor the conversations on WhatsApp.

### 5. Chapter Five: Literature review

In this chapter, I discuss concepts and theories that are central to the research, the analysis of the data and the argument I present. The concepts and theories discussed in this chapter are leisure, kinship and friendship, and fandoms in popular culture. I draw primarily on the literature from the anthropology of leisure, kinship and fandom studies. While there is insufficient space to review all the literature on kinship and for that matter leisure, I pay close attention to an important distinction made in the literature between work, casual and serious leisure as well as commercial leisure. Finally, I pay attention to how scholars have studied and interpreted the social interactions that take place at leisure clubs and social relations that are formed through the pursuit of leisure. This focus on social interactions and social relationships, a focus

of social anthropological and sociological studies, brings me to a discussion and review of the relevant literature on kin-making practices in the context of the city.

### 5.1 Kinship's role in creating social relations, including friendship

In this section, I discuss the ways in which kinship facilitates the creation of social relationships, including friendships. Kinship is a central topic in anthropological studies, with a long and complicated history that I am unable to summarise in this work. My focus is on kinship and friendship. Anthropologists Beer and Gardner (2015), among others, have argued that friend relationships are often overshadowed by kinship despite the fact that friendships and kinships are very much alike. In the context of fandoms in popular culture, especially in city environments, I argue that the terms used to describe non-biological kin are very similar to the definitions which scholars use to describe friendships. Beer and Gardner (2015:425-257) I think demonstrate the similarities between kinship and friendship and warn scholars against the expansion of “new kinship studies” as it can weaken the contrast between kinship and friendship.

In his book, *American Kinship*, Schneider (1968:1) analyses kinship as a cultural system and a system that represents relationships. His book represents a critique of how anthropologists have, at least before his book, theorised kinship primarily as a matter of blood and marriage. As a cultural system, and not a biological system, the notion of kinship should be expanded to include not only nuclear family structures, but also the non-biological ways in which societies across the world make kin. This means revisiting what is meant by terms such as “relative” (Schneider and Homans 1955:1194; Schneider 1968:23) and considering forms of kinship and kin relatedness that are not calculated through “blood” and “biology” but also, for example, reciprocity (Richardson 2006). Since Schneider's important work, anthropologists have documented the various ways in which individuals can make kin with individuals who are not biologically related. Adoption is one of the ways individuals can form kin relationships with people they are not related to. Richardson (2006), for one, suggests that kinship can also be made by individuals through nurturing one another. Coleman, Hyatt and Kingsolver (2017:163) also make note of “chosen families” formed amongst gay and lesbian individuals through practices and notions of nurture, care and solidarity. As a result, anthropologists have developed new concepts to describe and analyse kin relationships that have no biological bases, including ‘alternative kinship’ and ‘fictive kinship’ and ‘new kinship’.

For example, Levine (2008) discusses alternative kin in relation to families among gay men and lesbian women. Notably, gay men and lesbian women are still able to create biological kin through processes such as IVF and sperm donation, but Levine's work shows how kin are also made through non-biological practices and ideas. McKinnon's (2016) research also seeks to locate kinship beyond biological processes and considers practices of kin-making to include work as acts of care and nurturing, practices that are the outcome choice and intention and not naturally given processes. The notion of choice is also present in how anthropologists theorize friend relationships. Beer and Gardner (2015) argue that choice and voluntariness is vital to the creation of friendships, while Levine's (2008) notion of alternative kinship also emphasizes choice and agency over biological necessity and structure.

Terms such as sharing, reciprocity and altruism, concepts central to anthropology, are increasingly deployed by scholars who seek to build on Schneider's argument that kinship systems are cultural rather than natural systems. Nuttall (2000:54) suggests that within Inuit villages, sharing food reinforces kin relationships because it prevents the marginalisation and starvation of individuals who are unable to hunt and it creates patterns of sharing and distribution that makes social reproduction possible. In this body of literature, practices of sharing and altruistic behaviour are considered prosocial behaviours and reinforces charitable giving and volunteering in younger kin members (Molina, 2013:310). In some cases, sharing amongst kin can also inspire reciprocity. Furthermore, Beer and Gardner (2015) state that the sharing of both tangible things such as food and intangible things such as one's dreams is vital to making friends and kin, even as friendships may be asymmetrical and lacking in reciprocity (Beer and Gardner, 2015: 5806). Building on the work of Marcel Mauss, Beer and Gardner (2015) argue that friendships can be formed from mutual obligations such as working, trading and exchanging objects with other individuals, emphasising the exchanges and sharing of things in expressing social relationships. White (2000) uses the term 'fictive kinship' to refer to kin relationships between strangers that work together to draw in resources such as labour, food, money and information. White (2000) found that in Turkey when labour is done by non-biological kin, the relationship is still referred to as a kin relationship because of the collaboration between the individuals. In this research, building on these scholars and arguments, I suggest that kin relations and friendships are made and expanded not only through shared labour

and sharing, but that these can also be reaffirmed through leisure activities that take place in non-working environments. In cities, the sharing of objects (whether food or trading cars or knowledge) in leisure spaces, even commercial leisure spaces, can contribute to kin-making.

## 5.2 Leisure and its significance for social relations

There is a rather large body of literature on leisure (for a review, see Borsay 2006). Scholars such as Parker (1983), Chick (1998) and Stebbins (1992) define leisure by what it is not, in a way defining leisure by contrasting it to “work”. Stanley Parker (1983:8-9), a sociologist, identified in a now classic text that focused on western, industrialised societies, five categories of work and leisure that can help scholars interpret and analyse the world of leisure: (1) work, (2) work-related time, (3) existence time, (4) non-work obligations and (5) leisure. Parker (1982) defines non-work obligations and leisure time as designated for hobby activities (Parker, 1983). The categories identified by Parker’s (1983) have been widely used by other leisure researchers. Anthropologists such as Chick (1998a), who is in agreement with Parker’s definition, state that leisure can be understood as “free” or “unobligated” time. From the distinction between work obligations and leisure time, free time is understood to be time an individual has that is not designated for work.

Making an evolutionary argument, Chick (1998:27) stated that leisure became an integral part of culture when the human brain could conceive of the difference between activities that are necessary for survival and activities done without compulsion. Thus, he argues, leisure activities are found amongst all humans. Chick (1998:111) also critiques anthropologists who study non-western cultures and overlook leisure or define these activities as “expressive culture”. That is why Chick (1998) urged anthropologists to identify leisure activities in non-western cultures. Leisure activities typically studied by anthropologists and other scholars include active, sedentary and online activities. The first documented leisure and expressive activities defined as such in anthropology include poetry, music, dance, art and games, even though these were often not described as such by anthropologists (Chick, 2009b). In furthering the scholarly debate about leisure, Stebbins (1992) argued that there are two main forms of leisure, namely casual leisure and serious leisure. Casual leisure activities include mainly sedentary activities such as watching television, observing displays and going on a picnic (Stebbins, 1992:3), whereas serious leisure is defined as the “systematic

pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience". I found this distinction to be relevant to this research.

While leisure activities like watching television and observing displays appear to be passive actions, I argue that passive leisure activities can become active leisure activities and perhaps even fan activities. This is also what some scholars have argued, and it has led scholars to rethink the way in which Stebbins defined casual and serious leisure. One such scholar is Fiske (1992:30) who conceives of "fandom" as a living being which "selects from the repertoire of mass-produced and mass distributed entertainment certain performers, narratives or genres and takes them into the culture of a self-selected fraction of people". Taking a cue from Fiske (1992), we can define a "fan" as an individual within a fandom who is a consumer of popular culture. Jenkins (1992) urges fan researchers to perceive consumers, particularly consumers of visual media and popular culture not as passive receivers but as active participants in creating cultural products. The cultural products formed by consuming popular culture products range from formulating arguments to creating fan art.

Watching television and movies at home and in the cinema are ways in which individuals can participate in casual leisure activities and then participate in fan activities such as discussions and creating art. The point is often made that technologies such as television allow individuals to produce culture by consuming television programs. Painter (1994:70-71), for example, states that television does not merely reflect culture but produces culture and the study of television aims to understand the production of culture made by television. For Painter (1992) it is important for anthropologists to study what people do with television rather than what television does to people. Anthropologist Brian Larkin provides an example of "what people do with television" in his research focusing on Bollywood movies in Nigeria. Larkin (1997) studies how film has travelled from India to Nigeria and allowed for Hausa youth to explore the limits of accepted Hausa attitudes to love and sexuality through the narratives of Indian film (Larkin, 1997:406).

Residents of other African countries, like Tanzania, have also interacted closely with Indian films. Fair (2019:255) states that between the 1950s and the 1980s hundreds

of families in Tanzania would gather at the cinemas to watch a movie at the cinema. Fair (2019) describes going to the movies to be an essential form of leisure that families could participate in together. The entire process of going to the movies, from buying the movie ticket to getting dressed for the movie was an experience that brought individuals together and created social relationships. In their description of movie going in Tanzania, Fair (2019:255) detailed how individuals bought movie tickets on Tuesdays and then gathered during the week to discuss the upcoming movie, what they will wear, the communal meal that they will share before the movie and who they will be going to watch the movie with. By making a leisure activity, like watching a movie, the focal point of daily life and social interactions, Fair's (2019) research on moviegoing in Tanzania serves as an example of how a leisure activity can become more active and mimic fan behaviours while contributing to the creation of social ties among city residents.

Scholars have shown that serious leisure activities play a central role in the lives of leisure participants and that for those persons, the leisure activity is often described as a "leisure career" (Walker, 2013). The centrality of leisure in the lives of leisure participants have become a concern of some scholars, such as Stebbins (1992:2) and Walker (2013), to categorise leisure participants into the categories of amateurs, hobbyists and volunteers. Amateurs are untrained or semi-skilled individuals who engage in leisure activities such as art, sport and entertainment for pleasure and can measure their achievements against the achievements of professionals (Walker, 2013, p. 15). Hobbyists are similar to amateurs but do not have any professional aspirations (Walker, 2013, p. 18). A hobbyist has obtained all the equipment necessary for the leisure activity but does not measure their achievements to a professional (Walker, 2013, pp. 18-19). Individuals who are hobbyists are collectors, makers, activity participants, competitors in sports and art enthusiasts (Walker, 2013, p. 19). Lastly, volunteers are trained/skilled individuals who participate in a leisure activity for the benefit of others rather than themselves (Stebbins, 1992, p. 10).

Despite its shortcomings, the manner in which Stebbins (1998) frames serious leisure and categorises participants of serious leisure reveals similarities between leisure activities and the literature on the consumption of popular culture by fandoms. Echoing the literature that distinguishes between passive or active leisure, Henry Jenkins (1992), a fan researcher, argues that in certain cases consuming popular culture is an

active and not a passive act. Jenkins (1992) frames consumers as complex beings and states that to assume that the consumption of popular culture is always a passive act means ignoring vital dynamics in fan cultures. One of the vital dynamics of fan culture as described by Jenkins (1992) is what he calls 'participatory culture'. Jenkins (1992b:46) defines participatory culture as the active transformation of the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts and relationships. The production of new texts is what Jenkins (1992b) describes as forming a new "culture" that emerges from writing fan fiction, creating art, playing video games, collecting merchandise and making connections and social relationships with other fans. Furthermore, activities such as collecting and buying merchandise is considered a leisure activity (Cohen-Gewerc & Stebbins, 2013, p. 82). Fan activities, like leisure activities, typically take place in one's free time. Another similarity between leisure activities and fan activities is that both can require a designated space.

In their book *The Devil Makes Work* Clark and Critcher state that leisure is increasingly something that is purchased (Clark and Critcher, 1985:110). To have access to leisure and participate in leisure activities individuals must have money. Clark and Critcher (1985:110) state that individuals living in contemporary societies need money to participate in various kinds of leisure ranging from attending sporting events to eating. To participate in sports and gaming as leisure, individuals must buy specialised equipment and, in some cases, must spend money on accessing spaces where the leisure activity takes place. For instance, if an individual wants to play field hockey, a team sport, they must buy a hockey stick, the appropriate clothing and join a club that has a club fee. Building on the literature that seeks to place leisure in the context of a capitalist world, Borsay (2006:17) argues that leisure is fundamentally part of the economy. Leisure is part of the economy because it has been commercialised, there is a demand for it and there are products produced specifically for leisure activities (Borsay, 2006:17).

Given how globalisation has created global markets in food, energy and also leisure, anthropologists increasingly approach leisure as a commodified activity that operates within global markets. At the same time, such scholars seek to situate the global market in leisure within local contexts, paying attention to power, gender, status and social relationships. For example, sports scholars such as Vamplew (2010) illustrate that clubhouses and golf courses at golf clubs are often sites for males of a similar

social background to meet in a homosocial environment. Vamplew (2010:386) states that sporting activities such as golf provide participating individuals all over the world with a physical space to interact, negotiate and network with one another in addition to the other known benefits of physical and leisure activities. While participation in sport and leisure activities offers participants with a sense of personal achievement, teamwork and an opportunity to socialise, these activities have also been commodified more so than in the past. Yoder (1997) is an anthropologist who has conducted research on sport, particularly competitive bass fishing, and specifically as a commodified leisure activity. He notes that sporting activities are often commodified by businesses that seek to capitalize on the widespread interest in sport. The commodification of sporting and leisure activities places the activity in a larger commercial ecosystem with sponsors, merchandise and endorsements. Yoder (1997) makes special note of the prominent role of sponsors and promoters in serious leisure activities like bass fishing. Yoder (1997) places an emphasis on the roles of sponsors and businesses that align themselves with competitive bass fishing and coins the term “commodity agents”. The term “commodity agents” refers to groups and individuals that are involved in the production, facilitation and exchange of activity related to commodities (Yoder, 1997:415). I found this term useful in thinking about TCGs in Gauteng as the commodity agents of corporations such as Konami and Hasbro.

Kgabo Phillip Mokotil’s personality allows for individuals to bond over a common interest and goal (Cohen-Gewerc & Stebbins, 2013, p. 42). Even though this research does not focus on the individual rewards of engaging in the leisure activities described, these rewards are nevertheless important.

When considering the social relationships, social identities and even communities that are formed around leisure participants, the concepts of ‘fan culture’ and ‘subculture’ are used by scholars. Anthropologists have done extensive research on how to define subcultures and research focusing on particular subcultures. Yinger (1960), Haenfler (2003) and Linder (2001) all discuss subculture from an anthropological perspective. Scholars such as Jenks (2004) state that anthropologists not only do extensive research on subcultures but have also employed our understanding of subcultures to anthropological research. The existing knowledge on anime fans in South Africa comes from Trisha Ramrathen’s 2016 Masters dissertation in media and cultural studies from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Ramrathen’s (2016) dissertation

focuses on the subculture of anime fans. Ramrathen (2016) uses Hodkinson's (2002) notion of the characteristics of subculture to understand the nature of the anime subculture in South Africa. Paul Hodkinson is a sociologist who wrote about the goth subculture in the United Kingdom. Hodkinson (2002:30) identified four characteristics of subculture. These characteristics are (1) consistent distinctiveness, (2) identity, (3) commitment and (4) autonomy. These characteristics of subculture are similar in some ways to the aspects of fandom identified by Fiske (1992). Fiske (1992:34) identifies three characteristics of fandoms. (1) discrimination and distinction, (2) productivity and participation and (3) capital accumulation.

Despite the similarities in the characteristics between fan culture and subculture, subcultures and fandoms are defined differently. Fiske (1992:30) defines "fandom" as an ever-evolving concept and a "fan" as an individual within a fandom who is a consumer of popular culture. Hodkinson (2002:30) notes that within every subculture there is a set of shared values and tastes which differ from other subcultures which remain somewhat consistent throughout the years. Hodkinson (2002) gives the example of Goths wearing mostly black. Wearing black remains a consistent activity amongst Goths and remains consistent for years (Hodkinson, 2002).

Identity in the case of subculture defined by Hodkinson (2002:30-31) means having a shared identity. Hodkinson (2002) describes a like-mindedness amongst members of the same subculture and feeling like an "insider" is vital to the subculture and the individual. Having a consistent style of dress, values or behaviours is considered 'consistent distinctiveness' which is similar to the discrimination aspect of fandom identified by Fiske (1992) in that both of these concepts allow for individuals to draw lines between who is an insider and who is an outsider. According to Fiske (1992) the first characteristic speaks to fans being very discriminating (as in being able to make judgements) and drawing distinctive lines concerning who is a fan and who is not. Such discriminatory ability and behaviour are vital for fans forming an identity, and to identify insiders versus outsiders. In other words, fans distinguish who is a fan and who is not.

In the case of the anime community, Ramrathen (2016) discussed 'consistent distinctiveness' alongside acceptance, subculture capital, distinction and discrimination (Ramrathen, 2016:66-67). Acceptance into the anime subculture in

South Africa is easy to obtain as the subculture is inviting to newcomers. For Ramrathen (2016:58), subcultural capital in the South African anime subculture consists of downloaded anime, DVDs, merchandise and knowledge of Japanese culture. From this I learnt that subcultural capital is similar to the capital accumulation aspect of fandom. Capital accumulation as identified by Fiske (1992) describes the value fans place in the content they consume and their knowledge of the topics. The accumulation of knowledge is fundamental to the accumulation of cultural capital (Fiske, 1992:42). Fans use fan knowledge to distinguish between particular fan groups and to distinguish within fan groups (Fiske, 1992:42). For example, those with particular fan knowledge are fans and those who are fans with the most knowledge, expert fans, gain prestige amongst other fans (Fiske, 1992:42). Knowledge, specifically fan knowledge, like money, is a source of power for fans and creates hierarchies (Fiske, 1992:42-42). This signals that within fandoms there are fans who are better regarded than others, this is due to the possession or lack of expert/in-depth knowledge.

Outside of the South African context, Limbert's (2012) Masters of Art thesis focuses on identifying the characteristics of subculture in the *Magic* community. Limbert's (2012:9-12) study focused on how a gaming and leisure subculture emerged from *Magic*. Limbert (2012) places an emphasis on the "official" and "unofficial" community *Magic* has built. The "official" community Limbert (2012) is referring to are the events and products created by Wizards of the Coast and Hasbro, while the "unofficial" community refers to the usage of the *Magic* products, attendance at the events and the interactions amongst fans that create bonds between players. Limbert (2012:101) marries subcultures and fandom studies and argues that *Magic* exists in a space between subculture and fandom because the *Magic* players are active consumers. This point resonates with Jenkins' (1992) argument that the audience are not passive consumers. Furthermore, Limbert (2012:101-102) states that players "create meaning and value in their lives" through the consumption of popular culture texts such as *Magic*. Creating meaning is one of the ways Fiske (1992) states fans are active and producers of a culture and community. Fiske (1992) also identifies three types of fan productivity, namely semiotic productivity, enunciative productivity and textual productivity. Semiotic productivity is defined as fans creating meanings of content and enunciative productivity is using those meanings in social situations with other fans

(Fiske, 1992:37). This is similar to what Jenkins (2018) describes as negotiating meaning. Lastly, textual productivity is the process of fans creating and circulating texts amongst each other (Fiske, 1992:38) which in turn resembles participatory culture and “informal learning” described by Jenkins (2018:19). Similar to textual productivity, autonomy in subcultures discusses the subcultural (internal) forms of media and commerce (Hodkinson, 2002:16). This refers to the ways in which members of the subculture create media and also trade and exchange it.

The literature also shows that hierarchies exist within fandoms and subcultures. In the context of fandoms, knowledge is often used by fans to create hierarchies, with fans with the most knowledge occupying the top of the hierarchy. The existing literature on social stratification may help me here in understanding hierarchy and forms of social and other capitals within communities of fans, even as they create social relationships through the exchange of leisure commodities and other objects, including experiences. Ramrathen (2016:58) argued that the fans in South Africa she researches did not openly admit to the importance of subcultural capital but it was evident that there did still exist a sense of superiority amongst fans with more capital. Suman Nath defines social stratification as a term used to describe the hierarchical divisions of a society whereby its members are ranked according to their relative power, wealth and prestige (Nath, 2018). These often appear next to other dimensions of social stratification such as class, caste, gender, race and ethnicity (Sharma, 2010). In addition to accumulating knowledge as a way to achieve superior rank in fan communities, leisure participants also spend money to accumulate commodities that display status and rank. Fiske (1992:43), for example, mentions that collecting commodity objects (“merchandise”) related to particular pop culture products is another way of accumulating cultural capital. He argues that fans with more collectable objects and more expensive and rare collectable objects are often ranked higher than fans with cheaper or no collectable items (Fiske, 1992:43-44).

In this chapter, I discussed the scholarly literature relevant to the research questions this dissertation seeks to answer. It laid the foundation for the presentation of the empirical data which is to follow, as well as for the argument I am making that serious leisure activities, even in commercial places facilitated by commodity agents and international corporations, allow leisure participants the opportunity to create friendships through means that resemble kin-making as documented by other

anthropologists from across the world. In this sense, leisure is not only serious business, but also important to processes of social reproduction in urban environments. I now move to a discussion of the trading card games that form the focus of this research as an introduction to presenting the empirical data I made during field research.

## 6. Chapter Six: Serious Leisure and Commodities

In this chapter, I discuss TCGs as commodified serious leisure. In this chapter, I firstly describe how TCGs and the experience of playing have been commodified, then I make use of the literature on serious leisure and commodities to present TCGs like *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic* as commodified serious leisure activities. Furthermore, this chapter discusses how commodities and commodified serious leisure activities can create relationships between store employees, customers and players.

### 6.1 Commodities and selling the experience

Dragon Town and The Geek Home stock a variety of brands that manufacture and distribute TCG products and accessories. There is no space to discuss all the TCG accessories that these commodity agents sell in the respective stores, so I will limit my discussion to the card products, including card sleeves, deck boxes and playing mats. The central commodity used in TCGs is the cards. There are three ways players I worked with at Dragon Town and The Geek Home typically acquire cards: buying them from stores, trading with one another, or receiving them as gifts. Players can buy cards in several formats, namely as single cards, in decks, in booster packs or in other forms of sealed product. The phrase 'sealed product' is the umbrella term used by TCG players to refer to *Yu-Gi-Oh!* structure decks, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* two player starter decks, unopened booster packs for both *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic* decks, *Magic* starter kits, *Magic* bundles and other pre-constructed deck boxes. Each sealed product has a particular theme and contains different items. For instance, a *Magic* starter kit contains 2 decks of 60 cards, a guide explaining how the deck works, codes to use the decks in the online *Magic Arena* game and two cardboard deck boxes. Other sealed products such as a *Magic* Bundle will include more products. A typical *Magic* Bundle includes nine 14-card boosters, 15 Traditional foil and 15 regular basic lands, an oversized

spindown life counter, an alternative art traditional foil card and a cardboard card box. Similarly, there are *Yu-Gi-Oh!* sealed products that include accessories such as dice.

TCG accessories like ‘spindown life counters’ and dice are not usually included in a sealed product and are often bought separately from the cards. For instance, all *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic* players use card sleeves and playmats and most of them use deck boxes. During fieldwork, I observed that Ultimate Guard and Dragon Shield products were sold by most TCG stores and that both brands were widely used by nearly all of the research participants and players. Both Ultimate Guard and Dragon Shield feature prominently in the decorations of both Dragon Town and The Geek Home. The windows at both stores have promotional Ultimate Guard and Dragon Shield posters and there are dedicated displays for their products inside the stores. Ultimate Guard and Dragon Shield are not the only brands that are sold in Dragon Town and The Geek Home. Dragon Town and The Geek Home also offer brands such as Oakie Doakie Dice, which specialises in dice, and Wizards Choice and Ultimate Pro, which focus on card sleeves. However, players like Lee, Jordon and Kyeron all stated that they prefer Dragon Shield and Ultimate Guard card sleeves over the other brands.

In a conversation with Jordon, he stated that “most clients lean towards Dragon Shield” and that he has used all the brands stocked in The Geek Home and found that Dragon Shield was the “best and most comfortable” brand. After having this conversation with Jordon I went to Dragon Town and asked Lee and Kyeron about their favourite brands for deck boxes and card sleeves. Kyeron stated that he typically uses Dragon Shield, Ultimate Pro and Ultimate Guard card sleeves. When asked what makes some sleeves and deck boxes better than others, Kyeron showed me what players call “penny sleeves”, a term used to describe card sleeves that are made of thin, stretchy plastic that scratches easily, and compared the penny sleeve to a Dragon Shield card sleeve. The Dragon Shield sleeve felt thicker, and Kyeron demonstrated that it is more difficult to break the Dragon Shield sleeve. Furthermore, according to Kyeron, the Dragon Shield card sleeves shuffle smoother than some other brands. There are also other factors that make players more inclined to use brands like Dragon Shield. Lee stated that he uses Dragon Shield because it is “accessible” at Dragon Town and the sleeves are not as glossy as other brands, allowing players to read cards easily during games. Lee’s statement that he buys what is accessible at Dragon Town seems to contradict what Shiv stated in an individual interview.

Players are often less particular about the deck boxes and playmats they use. Many players use playmats and deck boxes from promotional sealed products or items they won in tournaments as prizes that cannot be sold. Players can buy *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic* cards and TCG accessories from various websites and stores. At Dragon Town and The Geek Home, players can buy cards and accessories through the stores' respective websites and in-store. The store websites are owned and made by the respective stores, but Konami and Wizards of the Coast do not require the stores that sell *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic* cards to make these websites.

A lot of labour goes into creating and maintaining websites like the ones Dragon Town and The Geek Home have. The Geek Home has one website which is also an online store that sells sealed products and TCG accessories. Dragon Town has three websites, namely *Dragon Town*, *Dracoti* and *Pharoah's Crypt*. *Dracoti* and *Pharoah's Crypt* are subsidiaries of Dragon Town. The *Dragon Town* website provides information about the physical store and is an online store for sealed products and TCG accessories. The *Dracoti* and *Pharoah's Crypt* websites are used to sell *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* single cards respectively.

The *Dracoti* website is co-owned by Joe and another *Magic* player. Shiv stated that Dragon Town commissioned a local web designer that he knows personally to design all three websites (Shiven, 2023). The *Yu-Gi-Oh!* card information is manually loaded onto the *Pharoah's Crypt* website for players, collectors and customers to read before purchasing. The card information on the website includes the name of the card, a description of what the card does, an image of the card, how many the store has in stock and the price. For *Magic*, the card information is not uploaded because "most people who buy have a deck list to work off of. The deck list is typically for a tournament, so they already know what they want and what the card does". Shiv stated that it is necessary for them to include the card's description on the *Pharoah's Crypt* website because of the lack of formats in *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. Since there are different formats in *Magic* with different rules and which are played in different capacities (casual and competitive), players will buy cards that work best for the format they want to play. However, since the two *Yu-Gi-Oh!* formats are both played at competitive and casual levels, there are more card options for *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players to choose from.

Players can also trade cards with one another. Players either sell cards to one another or trade cards that are valued at the same price. To trade/sell a card to another player, players will look up the value of the card they are looking to trade on websites such as *TCG Player*, which is a marketplace website that players use to sell their cards online. Shiv stated that “the norm is for players to check *TCG Player* to gauge the price of a card.” *TCG player* is a marketplace which Shiv stated makes the prices “volatile” because “if one person sells a card for really high the entire market value is skewed” (Shiven, 2023). Websites like *TCG Player* allow players and sellers to list prices of the cards they are selling at different prices. A value is then determined by finding the average price (Shiven, 2023).

There are other ways for players/sellers and stores to determine the price of a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* or *Magic* single card. One of these is to use the same price as an American store and then convert the price from US Dollars to Rands. Shiv stated that Dragon Town uses the single-card prices at the American stores Troll and Toad and Card Kingdom for *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic* respectively, as these were identified as the biggest card stores. They make use of their card pricing instead of marketplaces like *TCG Player*, where the prices seem to be constantly fluctuating. Shiv speculates that American stores determine the price of a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* card based on popularity and “how well a card does” in Japan and stated that “we [*Yu-Gi-Oh!* TCG format players] are kind of lucky because our cards go through a beta test in Japan first, so these cards that we got about a week ago, they’ve had for two months. So, they get their cards first.”

For sealed products, South African stores are given a recommended retail price (RRP) by Solarpop, the sole distributor of TCGs in South Africa. The RRP given to stores like Dragon Town and The Geek Home includes Solarpop’s mark-up for overhead expenses, the price of the air freight and import taxes (Shiven, 2023). Solarpop imports cards from Belgium because South Africa does not have the printing machines used to print out *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic* cards. As a consequence, with Solarpop’s mark-ups, sealed products can typically be more expensive for South African players than for American players. During fieldwork for this dissertation, I was often told that “the strongest card in any TCG is the credit card”, and many players would state that stronger and rarer cards are more expensive. Zander stated that stronger cards in both *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* are generally printed at a higher rarity when they first come out, but are eventually released as commons at a lower price but with the same

strength. Despite this, Zander also stated that stronger cards that players may want to use to win games are generally more expensive.

The prices of cards and other TCG accessories does mean that this leisure activity is not for everyone, especially in South Africa with its high level of poverty, unemployment and staggering inequality. I also could not start playing *Magic* frequently because I did not have the financial means to start playing. Zoey had similar opinions about it and would speak to me about the price of cards and orders on a regular basis. Despite the fact that Zoey and I were both interested in playing *Magic*, neither of us felt that we could afford to play the game because it's not as easy as just buying a deck of cards: there is some expectation to buy more cards in the future to better your deck and your game play. Hasbro is also always releasing new decks themed around popular culture items, such as the popular television serial *Stranger Things*. Some *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players are lucky enough to be gifted cards by other players. For example, Kyeron told me that when he first started playing *Magic* at Dragon Town, he was gifted various cards and, in some instances, decks of cards by more experienced players. When I was learning to play *Magic*, players would often let me use their cards.

Earlier, I discussed my experience as a new *Magic* player. That day, after the final round of *Magic* ended, I watched the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players collect their prizes, namely booster packs. When *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players receive prizes from the tournament organiser, they typically stand in a circle and applaud every player as the rankings in the tournament are announced. On some occasions, players will discuss what they hope to see in the booster packs they receive. After receiving their booster packs, many players leave their friend groups to open their boosters quietly. On this particular night, one of the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* card collectors and players loudly announced that he had been looking for a specific dragon card for months. All the other players around him expressed disappointment because he did "pull" the card he was looking for and mentioned that they really wanted him to get this card just so he would stop talking about how much he wanted it. The collector then decided to buy all the available stock of this particular booster pack in the hopes that one of those packs held the dragon he was looking for. It is not uncommon for players with the means to try to buy a store's entire stock of a particular card, decks or boosters, but the stores do not always allow it. For instance, Joe does not allow players to buy all of Dragon Town's stock of a

certain card because he feels it is unfair to players who do not have the means to employ such strategies. This I think is an example of now allowing wealth to become a dominant way in which the hierarchy within the local playing community is formed. The commodity agents and stores therefore do not always choose to act in line with what would be the most profitable action, recognizing that it may undermine their standing in the playing community and produce resentment among some customers.

Yet the other *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players who were present that day at The Geek Home did not seem to mind the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* card collector's actions and there were no signs of public protest at least. Instead, some of the players were happy for the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* card collector and others asked him if he was willing to sell or trade any cards that he found but did not want. Everyone stood around him as he tore open countless foil packets and quickly sifted through the cards in each. Nearly two thousand Rands' worth of cards later, the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* card collector came out empty-handed, at least in terms of what he really wanted. There were, however, some winners from the booster packs he bought, and he gifted certain rare or wanted cards to his friends.

In an interview with Jeanre and Zoey, both mentioned that there are a few *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players who just enjoy opening booster packs. It seems to have become a ritualistic action for some players. Jeanre stated that they have a mutual friend who "likes to buy booster packs to open them", to which Zoey added "she doesn't know the cards or the game very well. She just likes opening boosters". Like the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* card collector, Jeanre and Zoey's friend, does not have a problem giving cards found in boosters to friends (Jeanre & Zoey, 2023). Jeanre stated that "one time she gave me a whole booster. One of the cards in there was 58 Dollars" (Jeanre & Zoey, 2023). I mention this because while coding the data made in the field, I established that gifting objects like cards and art, particularly to close friends, is prominent amongst TCG players.

Although some players might not participate in TCGs like *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* because they cannot afford it, there are a few individuals who do not play TCGs and sit at Dragon Town on weekends and weekdays. Individuals like me, who do not play a TCG may still come to Dragon Town because Konami and Wizards of the Coast do not only sell cards. Both Konami and Wizards of the Coast have widened the commodities sold to include experiences, as opposed to just objects. Konami and Wizards of the Coast require TCG stores to be OTSes or LGSes. An OTS is an Official

Tournament Store, meaning stores that host *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Tournaments, while LGSes are Local Gaming Stores, meaning stores that host Friday Night *Magic*. LGSes and OTSes are required to look a certain way and have certain facilities to host Friday Night *Magic* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournaments.

I mentioned earlier that only the registered owner of an existing store can apply to be part of the WPN. There is a similar process involved in becoming a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* OTS, as both Konami and Wizards of the Coast require stores to have a permanent exterior sign and public amenities for customers to use, such as restrooms. When asked what a store needs to host tournaments, Shiv stated that stores must “cover basic human needs”. Wizards of the Coast specifies that stores must have a “dedicated play space” and must sell “sealed products” (Wizards of the Coast, 2024). Konami’s specified requirements state that stores must host at least one tournament every month and that there is a minimum seating capacity of 16 players. In a conversation with Zander, he mentioned that having a dedicated play space involved having tables and chairs set up to accommodate players and games.

There are benefits to being an OTS. Konami sends exclusive products such as playmats, card boxes and boosters to OTS stores globally to encourage players to attend and participate in tournaments (Anon., 2024). The products sent by Konami are only available at an OTS, and an OTS cannot be bought or sold. If an OTS is found selling exclusive products, they can lose their OTS title and be banned from selling *Yu-Gi-Oh!* products. Konami tries to enhance the playing experience for *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Players by sending an OTS marketing material and other exclusive products. Shiv and Zander both expressed that they feel this is how Konami shows they “care” for not only the players, but also for the stores while promoting their products and the game.

Being an LGS does not come with benefits the way being an OTS does. Wizards of the Coast does, however, give stores the option of becoming a Premium Store, which are listed higher on the Wizards Store and Event Locator and have access to exclusive promotional products (Wizards of the Coast, 2024). There are more requirements to being a Premium Store than there are to being an LGS. Wizards of the Coast has an extensive list of requirements for a store to be a Premium Store, including that stores must meet design, housekeeping, accessibility, information, staff, play experience and customer interaction requirements set by Wizards of the Coast (Wizards of the Coast,

2024). I asked why Dragon Town is not a Premium Store, to which Shiv responded that he does not find the benefits to be worth it because they would have to change a lot about the store. Shiv's comment about changing the store refers to the design requirements Premium Stores must meet. When asked if he saw any benefit to being a Premium Store, Zander said that being a Premium Store is "a lot of effort and admin" and that, while Premium Stores do get "slightly more unique promos", it does not "attract any people". Zander and Shiv's reservations about Premium Stores can be interpreted to refer to the application process of becoming a Premium Store and the maintenance required. I asked Zander how Wizards of the Coast knows a store is maintaining the standard they set for Premium Stores and he stated that stores must take pictures and videos to confirm that they send to Wizards of the Coast to confirm that "upgrades" were made. One of the design requirements Premium Stores must meet includes having matching tables and chairs, meaning Dragon Town would need to get rid of their current chairs and buy new ones. Furthermore, stores are not allowed to have *Magic* branding, art and logos that are not official and current artworks released by Wizards of the Coast on the walls.

Jeanre expressed that she did not want Dragon Town to be a Premium Store because she did not want the artwork to be taken down. A lot of the artwork at Dragon Town, including the sign on top of the second door and the posters by the cashier's desk, are gifts given to Dragon Town by local artists. Dragon Town frequently displays the work of local artists and collaborates with them. Collaboration with artists, friends and TCG players to enhance gameplay and the experience at the store is embedded into Dragon Town. In the next section, I will discuss the degrees of participation in serious leisure of the players at Dragon Town and how the commodities allow players to form relationships with one another.

## 6.2 Commodified serious leisure and its role in forming social relationships

As previously mentioned, Stebbins (2007:5) defines serious leisure as the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer to express a combination of special skills, knowledge and experience pertaining to a leisure activity. In this section, I depict TCGs as serious leisure activities using the definition of serious leisure and the three categories of serious leisure participants provided and identified by Stebbins (1982). For example, I have identified Jordon as an amateur player, Aaron as a hobbyist, a subcategory of hobbyists that was revealed through fieldwork, and Lee as a volunteer.

Jordon fits into the amateur category because he has only been playing *Yu-Gi-Oh!* for about a year since he agreed to participate in this research. Jordon was being taught how to play *Yu-Gi-Oh!* by Zander. When I asked Jordon if he was a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* player, he said, “kind of”. I rephrased my question and asked him if he knew how to play and what the rules of the game are he told me that he is still learning how to play. Remember that Walker (2013:15) defines an amateur as an untrained or semi-skilled person who engages in a leisure activity. Walker (2013:18) also writes that hobbyists are similar to amateurs but do not have any professional aspirations but may be sports competitors, makers, art enthusiasts or collectors. Aaron is a good example of a hobbyist as defined by Walker (2013) and Stebbins (1992) because he attended *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournaments at Dragon Town, Geek Home and national tournaments. Being a sports competitor is one of the ways hobbyists participate in leisure (Walker, 2013:18-19). Aaron mainly attends weekend and evening events such as Friday night *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournaments at Geek Home and the Saturday *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournaments at Dragon Town, which take place after typical working hours, it can be argued that Aaron participates in leisure activities during “unobligated time” or “leisure time”. When I asked Aaron when he plays *Yu-Gi-Oh!* or participates in tournaments he said “mostly on the weekends”. I asked Aaron if I was correct in saying that he plays *Yu-Gi-Oh!* in his free time. Aaron stated that he does play in his “free time” and went on to say “but not all my free time, I have time after work but I don’t play then”. Many other playing regulars at Dragon Town also mainly attend evening and weekend events, which can be considered leisure time as these times fall outside of the standard working week.

According to Walker (2013) a hobbyist is a leisure participant that obtains all of the equipment necessary for a leisure activity but does not measure their achievements to the achievements of a professional. The equipment necessary to participate in a leisure activity such as a TCG would be the cards. When Aaron participates in *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournaments he typically brings his backpack with him. Aaron has a plain black backpack that does not have any noticeable branding on it. In his backpack, Aaron keeps a folder used to store *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards, a few pairs of dice, two or three playmats, a matpod, a few decks in deck boxes and another box used to store deck boxes. While it is common for players to have dice, playmats and deck boxes Aaron has items that other players do not, such as a matpod and a box for his deck boxes.

Not all of the objects Aaron uses when he plays a TCG were bought, he also won some in *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournaments.

Commodities like the dice, playmats, deck boxes and of course the cards that are used to play TCGs are important to players not only because they allow gameplay but also because these commodities and how these are used by players contribute to creating social ties. I argue that while commodities are often considered to be anti-social, especially in the older anthropological literature that sharply distinguished between gifts and commodities (e.g. Carrier 1999), in cases such as these, they can create and strengthen relationships between individuals. Anthropologists have long distinguished between gifts and commodities, recognising that these two forms of exchange have centrally different social meanings, functions and consequences for social ties. The distinction between gifts and commodities is useful but also simplifies the understanding of these two forms of exchange and Carrier (2021:68) admits that sometimes this distinction is not so clear. Carrier (2021:68) states that it is easy to say that commodities, which exist in the economic realm, are transacted by calculating individuals who price objects high and value nothing. Furthermore, despite families being considered to be essential to the social realm in which gifts exist, many family members are not on speaking terms or do not have stable relationships (Carrier, 2021:68-69). In my observations, the players who play at Dragon Town and The Geek Home, including the employees of the stores, have cultivated seemingly stable ties and friendships that are often built on playing games with one another rather than exchanging gifts.

In the anthropological literature, commodities are valued primarily for their market price and the transactional relationships they permit, whereas gifts are considered to be personal or social. This means that gifts are often taken to symbolise personal relationships, obligations and cultural practices of reciprocity whereas commodities symbolise the market and impersonal relations. Put differently, Carrier (2021:63) states that commodities concern the social reproduction of things while gifts are concerned with the social reproduction of people. This sharp distinction has been challenged by recent scholarship (Zelizer 2021, Hart 2017, Krige 2019). In the case of TCG players at Dragon Town and The Geek Home, the trading cards and other objects like playmats are often not gifts received from other players, friends or family members and are instead bought by the player from the store. Typically, most cards used to play

TCGs are obtained as commodities, not as gifts. There are of course instances where an object can be a gift, like Aarons playmat holder which he got for Christmas from his father. However, I have observed that most players purchase their playing equipment themselves.

Customers of Dragon Town and The Geek Home can purchase cards and other playing equipment either in the store or through the store's website. Whereas Carrier (2021:63-64) argues that commodities "dissolve" relationships between the transactors after the transaction is done, I argue that commodities transactions can build relationships between transactors at stores like Dragon Town and The Geek Home instead of dissolving them. At first glance, the relationships that are built between transactors at Dragon Town and The Geek Home appear to be similar to the concept of a customer being loyal to a local store because the store assistant is friendly. Carrier (2021:67) argues that the relationship between a patron and the "friendly store assistant" is not social because the relationship is not recurrent and the store assistant is obligated to be friendly to the customer. Hochschild (1983) uses an example of a flight attendant who is obligated to be friendly and helpful to passengers and states that obligatory friendliness is later abandoned at the end of the workday. The obligatory friendliness and helpfulness apply to store employees at both Dragon Town and The Geek Home, since it is a store which aims to satisfy customers to ensure they make a profit. However, at stores like Dragon Town and The Geek Home, employees are often players as well. Store employees of Dragon Town and The Geek Home must be friendly to customers when they are working but employees like Kyeron are also players and spend time at the store when they are not working. Employees of Dragon Town and The Geek Home thus choose to be friendly and be friends with customers and other players also because the all-form part of the wider playing community and subculture, and they recognise that their relationship to customers is more complex than many other buyer-seller relations.

This point is also illustrated in other studies. Through interviews with retired drug dealers, Crawford (2021) found that friendships between drug dealers and those who bought drugs were both beneficial and hindrance to the business. In the suburban area in which Crawford (2021:260-261) conducted his research, drug dealers exclusively sold drugs to networks of friends, kin and acquaintances which required the drug dealers to share drugs and spend time with the individuals they sold drugs

to. Crawford (2021:259) thus demonstrates that friendships and choosing to be friends with customers are “functionally necessary” for certain businesses to exist. At TCG stores like Dragon Town and Geek Home, the voluntary nature of friendship can be seen not only between store employees and players but also between players who choose to interact with one another to achieve a shared goal such as the growth and wellbeing of the playing community or subculture.

While Walker (2013:18) and Stebbins (1992) suggest that hobbyists typically do not have professional aspirations, I found that some TCG players at Dragon Town and Geek Home are hobbyists with professional aspirations. Aaron is an example of a hobbyist who participates in local and international level tournaments but does not want to be a professional player. At Dragon Town and Geek Home, there are players who forms “teams” with the hopes that team members will go beyond national-level tournaments. Teams refer to groups of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players who play against one another regularly with the intention of building stronger decks to win more local, national and international tournaments. Players join teams by being invited or by forming new teams (Shiven, 2023). Players who participate in teams, schedule times to practice and play against one another to test out their decks (Shiven, 2023). Team practices can take place in a player’s home or even in a TCG store like Dragon Town or Geek Home. Shiv mentioned a tournament where a player left because he did badly but then a member of his team won the tournament and there was a shared sense of accomplishment. This shows that the individuals who form part of this community have ties that are often complex and multi-faceted, as one individual may be a player and a customer, but in another context may be a team player with a store employee.

In Shiv’s description of what “teams” are and why they are formed, he placed an emphasis on how teams can unite players and give them a sense of belonging. During our interview, Shiv repeatedly stated that there is an element of “repping your store, repping your home grounds and getting your name out there” (Shiven, 2023). “Repping your store” refers to the fact that an OTS can support a team as a sponsor but the store doesn’t necessarily have to give the team money, cards or any other equipment used for the TCG. In competitive bass fishing, as described by Yoder (1997), sponsoring players is one way for companies to advertise their products and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* teams do not receive any sponsored products from stores that act as sponsors. Shiv stated that teams will often make matching t-shirts themselves with a store’s

name on it to “rep the store” so “everyone knows who you are” (Shiven, 2023). I asked Shiv about teams again and asked why “repping a store” is so important to some teams. Shiv gave the example of soccer teams in the UK. Shiv explained that many people in the UK support their home team simply because “that’s where they’re from”. Teams show a sense of loyalty to the stores, despite not always practising in the stores, and a bond between each other despite being competitors. So, despite the fact that players in this playing community use commodities created by transnational corporations, they find ways to embed the commodities and leisure activities in local contexts. In fact, it is unlikely that trading cards would become such a globally popular leisure activity without it finding ways to embed itself in local stores, networks, and national competitions.

The t-shirts that *Yu-Gi-Oh!* teams wear also act as uniforms and have a similar function to school or employee uniforms. Interestingly, the employees at both Dragon Town and The Geek Home do not have uniforms or employee dress-codes but they do have shirts and hoodies with the store's logo on it that they can choose to wear when they want to. The importance of uniforms has been recognised in the literature. Hertz (2007:43) states that uniforms not only symbolise unity but also raises questions of individuality, and conformity and act as a visual representation of identity. Uniforms can distinguish between insiders and outsiders, or in this case a team t-shirt distinguishes competitive players who prefer to play at certain stores from players and non-players (Hertz, 2007:44). Being able to distinguish between players and non-players and identifying players from certain stores can help strengthen the collective identity of TCG players and players from certain stores. Hertz (2007) also argued that uniforms can take away from an individual’s self-expression and can lead to conformity because they act as visual reminders of what the individuals wearing the uniform have in common. In terms of building a TCG community, uniforms as team t-shirts are incredibly helpful in creating a shared identity that strengthens the playing community.

While some players indicate loyalty to a store by wearing a shirt that represents the store, other players like Lee show their loyalty to a store by continuously purchasing products solely from a particular store. Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) define store loyalty as a “biased behavioural response, expressed over time”. Store loyalty can reflect a customer’s commitment and trust in a store or brand. For TCG players, store loyalty may indicate trust in the store and its role in the local playing community rather than

trust in a brand. For instance, Lee stated that he uses Dragon Shield because it was “accessible” at Dragon Town and the sleeves are not as glossy as other brands so during games players can read cards easily. This statement indicates a loyalty to the store, buying what the store has to offer, instead of looking elsewhere for a product he might like better. Shiv once stated that “every player is loyal to the player, they’re not loyal to the store. Where a player can get something cheaper, or get more of something they want- they’ll rather do that. They wouldn’t necessarily support the store they play at.”

During fieldwork, I found that players buy from whichever store they can get a better deal at while others emphasised store loyalty. In my observation, players will play at one store for the majority of the time, indicating loyalty. Ryan, a *Magic* player at Geek Home, sometimes orders cards from Dragon Town because it is more convenient for him to pick them up but he still mostly plays *Magic* at Geek Home. Similarly, Aaron mostly plays *Yu-Gi-Oh!* at Dragon Town but will go to a Friday night *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournament at Geek Home. Players buying from other stores and participating in tournaments at other stores do not necessarily cause friction between stores. When I asked Shiv if there was any competition between the stores, he stated that “players want to play and players have to play, that’s the whole point” and that every store wants to make a profit but they still “stick together” (Shiven, 2023). “Sticking together” in Shiv’s words refers to instances where stores share stock or warn each other about cheating and incidents where someone has been caught stealing store merchandise. There are also instances where stores receive help from individuals who do not work there and receive no compensation from the store for the volunteering that they do. This also demonstrates that the store’s business practices are not only concerned with making a profit but takes into consideration their relation to other stores by sometimes reducing competition, while also taking into consideration the local playing community.

Lee is not an employee of Dragon Town, but like Zander, he is a tournament organiser. Shiv revealed that Lee initially expressed an interest in becoming a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournament organiser at Dragon Town because he saw it as an opportunity to change the playing environment at Dragon Town. Lee and Shiv explained that the process of Lee becoming the tournament organiser happened naturally and slowly because he was interested in having tournaments and was seen as an authoritative figure by other players because of his big personality. Lee’s contributions to Dragon Town go beyond

tournament organisation. On one occasion, I was sitting with Shiv at Dragon Town and I asked about the packets of NikNaks sold at the store. When I asked Shiv why there were so many packets of chips, he explained to me that packets of chips were just “easy snacks” and that Joe’s wife sells the biltong at her store. Feeling facetious, I asked Shiv why they sell “junk food” like NikNaks and Monster energy drinks when they could sell apples and water. Shiv said, “Because no one likes to play and eat fruit”. Ruan added to the explanation of the need for junk food and energy drinks by saying, “We need to fuel ourselves for the game” (Jeanre & Zoey, 2023). At that point I had never tried Monster, so I was curious as to why it was so popular that the fridges were always fully stocked with it. In passing, Zoey once mentioned that they sell more energy drinks than they do comics.

Food and beverages are important at Dragon Town and are constantly spoken about. Monster energy drinks are amongst the many delicious beverages spoken about at Dragon Town. Shiv, Armand and Ruan would rave about Japanese delicacies, juicy burgers and spicy Korean noodles often. Food is discussed so often and with such great detail and excitement that I took order recommendations from the three local food critics at Dragon Town. These intricate and interesting dishes were discussed in Dragon Town as much as Monster was. The next section discusses practices of eating together and discussing food as one expression of social ties that commercial leisure encourages.

## 7. Chapter Seven: Casual Leisure and work at Dragon Town

This chapter describes the casual leisure activities regular players participate in at Dragon Town. During fieldwork, I started to refer to Dragon Town as a “communal couch”. The communal aspect came to the fore partially from the fact that Dragon Town is a public place of sorts, as well as the fact that many players refer to the individuals at Dragon Town as members of a “community”. In an interview with Shiv, he explained why he refers to Dragon Town and TCG players from other stores as being part of a community. He specifically mentioned social interaction, food and eating together. Shiv stated “we come together under a common purpose- to play *Magic* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and we interact with each other. Like the amount of times someone comes in here and says ‘I’m hungry, you guys feel for pizza?’ then buys pizza for the

entire store. It happens more than you think. That's something you see when a group of people are really close to each other or have something in common" (Shiven, 2023).

The idea of Dragon Town resembling a couch came from my own feelings of being completely at ease and comfortable when at Dragon Town. I also noticed how comfortable other people were in Dragon Town which at first, I was surprised by because I kept thinking of Dragon Town as a place similar to a café. But over time I realised it was not quite a café, but more of a "communal couch". Dragon Town felt like a couch open for anyone to use and sit on as if it were their home. For instance, working from home for some people might mean sitting in bed or even on the couch. Even eating lunch may happen on the couch instead of at a table, and even hosting friends and talking with them often happens on the couch. These are all activities that I observed taking place at Dragon Town and perhaps then it is no wonder that I came to see this store as a couch of sorts. Some research participants, including Shiv, Kyeron and Aaron, echoed a similar sentiment: that players initially come to the store to play a TCG but stay for the social interactions, even if playing a TCG is the main reason people come to the store. I referred to this as "an excuse to talk to people" (Shiven, 2023). This is indicative of how a serious leisure activity, like a TCG, can assemble individuals together to participate in casual leisure activities which can then also turn into the making of friends and kin.

In addition to the metaphor of the couch coming to stand for how I experienced Dragon Town, as I became more of an insider to the local playing community and to Dragon Town, the importance of the kitchenette and eating dawned on me. On weekdays there are typically at least two people in Dragon Town who are not employees but who are working. As mentioned earlier, Ruan and Armand often work from Dragon Town and socialise with friends at the same time, with Armand stating that working in Dragon Town is so that "you don't spend so much time alone" and that it is a way to "keep sane". Typically, Ruan and Armand are side by side in front of their laptops, eyes forward and making light conversation with one another, diverging from this momentarily to discuss a movie or meme. Working is one of the ways the metaphorical living room couch is used.

There are of course occasions when Ruan and Armand are not working. For instance, on a Friday in July, I came to Dragon Town after 1pm and found Ruan, Armand and

Shiv at the back of Dragon Town starting a fire to braai. Their laptops were sitting on the table closest to the back of the store, just in case one of their colleagues needed them. This was the first time I was present for a Dragon Town Braai, which happens more frequently than initially thought. It soon became apparent that eating together and sharing food and its preparation also plays a role in shaping the social ties that form in and around this leisure space.

When I asked Zoey about these braais, she laughed and said that Joe will braai any chance he gets, which is why there is a braai grid and braai stand in the back of Dragon Town. In typical South African fashion, Joe braais for “special occasions” like an employee’s birthday or an employee’s last day. Shiv has even picked up tips on how to build a good fire for a braai from Joe. I invited Shiv to my house for my birthday during fieldwork. When Shiv arrived, I was building a fire with my friends so that we could toast marshmallows. Shiv stood close by and told me if I wanted to make a bigger fire, I should stack the wood in a certain way- the way Joe had taught him to do. Shiv had also mentioned on other occasions that he learnt about how to braai meat a certain way from Joe, who had cultivated his own recipes and methods from his familial relations and the cooking knowledge he accumulated. Ochoa and Badder (2022:22) demonstrated how students form alternative kinship relations through cooking and eating together. Ochoa and Badder’s (2022:23) description of how they learnt home recipes from fellow students echoes how Shiv learnt braai techniques from Joe. In both Ochoa and Badder’s case and that of Shiv and Joe’s, there is a process of learning that transfers “traditions” and past family dynamics to the present with non-relatives through being present together.

Zoey also mentioned that Ruan, Armand and Shiv sent Kyeron to the garage on the corner earlier in the week to buy coke because they were using the two-plate electric stove to cook in the kitchenette and they wanted something that was not already in the Dragon Town fridges to drink with their meal. Over time I started to pay more attention to the presence of food at Dragon Town and recalled a previous Sunday when Zoey sat at a *DND* table with a small Styrofoam plate of cake slices. When asked whose cake it was, one of the *DND* players said it was someone’s birthday and this person brought plates of cake for everyone. I came to realise that it is not uncommon for regulars to bring food to Dragon Town on weekends, and many players would either order food for delivery or bring a lunchbox with them. When I was a newcomer to

playing *Magic*, I spent a lot of time talking to Michael, and on a few occasions he offered to buy me a meal from whichever restaurant he was ordering from for lunch. If a player brings a lunchbox they can store it in the same fridge that the store uses to keep the energy drinks they sell. If they want to, players can warm their food in the microwave in the kitchenette. The kitchenette and fridges are an indication of how food, eating and even cooking are integrated into the activities that take place at Dragon Town. I consider customers who put their personal items in the store's fridge a symbol of how Dragon Town allows players to mix their personal lives with the practices of the store. By participating in activities that mirror those that one typically carries out at home and with family in Dragon Town, Dragon Town becomes more than just a store, but also a substitute home that facilitates kinship relationships. It also adds to the sense that everyone present belongs to a wider community, the community of trading card players.

Dragon Town also facilitates the watching of movies, anime and serial television shows, which are all considered casual leisure activities (Stebbins, 1992:3). Fair (2019:253) stated that movies can be used as instruments to bring people, families and small groups together to socialise. According to Fair's work, movies are similar to TCGs, as they allow individuals with similar interests to not only gather but also to begin social interactions by discussing the meaning of the story (Fair, 2019:253). Similarly, players often gather to play a TCG, their shared interest, and then start conversations through their shared interest. In this way, Dragon Town emerges as a place to meet and participate in various leisure activities, not just playing TCGs, not just passively consuming popular culture commodities created by transnational corporations.

The flat-screen TV that sits in the front of the store is an obvious hint to the fact that regulars are given the opportunity to watch a movie or TV show. The TV is usually off, which makes it easy to forget that it is even there, and was seldom used when I was there. If there happens to be a big sporting event like the Grand Prix, someone might ask to play the last few minutes of the race. The TV is mostly used after a tournament if most of the players have already left the store and mainly by the employees still in the store. The TV might also be used on quiet weekends when there are regional tournaments at other stores or when there are state tournaments. In instances where there are few people sitting in Dragon Town on weekends, Shiv might put on a movie

that he or someone else wants to watch. The TV is not the only appliance used to watch movies at Dragon Town.

The other appliance used for watching movies is the white pegboard across from the kitchenette. The white peg board is used once a month on weekends by three or four-weekend regulars who have asked permission to watch a movie at Dragon Town. The small group of regulars who use the peg board to project their movie onto, bring everything they need, including the movie, a laptop and a projector. Watching the movie at Dragon Town is a collaborative effort and the individuals who are interested arrange and set a date with Shiv. Setting up the movie is also a collaborative effort. At one of the informal movie screenings, the set up took approximately an hour because I asked if the holes in the white peg board bothered anyone when they were watching. This sparked a brainstorming session: “what can we do about the holes?”. After a short discussion during which everyone pitched various types of material that could be used to cover the holes in the peg board, two brave volunteers set off to buy a tablecloth or large white poster paper.

While the movie, anime or television serial plays, the individuals who are present to watch the movie might not actually be looking at the TV/pegboard. The people “watching” the movie/anime/television series are usually busy on their phones or laptops playing a video game. Some of the regulars at Dragon Town come to the store with their laptops to play video games or watch a video game tournament while there, and many of the weekday regulars and Shiv often watch a video game competition live on YouTube or another streaming site. At Dragon Town and The Geek Home, the playing tables, objects and areas are all available for players to use. At Dragon Town this makes players feel as though they can stay for as long as they want to, so they can use the amenities such as the kitchenette, fridges and playing area for non-TCG-related leisure activities. The Geek Home has used all of the available space so that there is more space for players to sit and has a wide variety of games for players to browse through.

From my presentation and description of serious and casual leisure, I argue that the boundaries between work and leisure are blurred at Dragon Town. This is significant because scholars have placed work and leisure on opposite sides of the spectrum when writing about capitalist societies. Yet I have described arrangements and

practices by which individuals work in leisure spaces and use commodities to facilitate the creation and maintenance of social ties, usually seen as the function of gifts. One way in which the stores contribute both to the company's bottom line and to the wider playing community, is by some levels of collaboration between stores. Moreover, the interior design and layout of stores not only seek to comply with the requirements of the transnational corporations that designed these as an OTS, but also create homely spaces in which players and customers can feel at home, collaborate as they play trading card games, and become friends as they cook together, hang out together, eat together, watch TV together: all while building the wider playing community.

## 8. Chapter Eight: Conclusion

The primary research questions this dissertation sought to answer was formulated as follows: How does commodified leisure such as trading card games contribute to the formation of social relationships among leisure participants in Gauteng, South Africa? I answered this question by presenting material from observations and participant observation, in-person interviews with members of the trading card playing community, and an analysis of documentary material. I documented the various activities that take place in the two stores that were the main field sites. I focused not only on the playing of TCGs, but also the interior design and physical layout of the two stores, making the point that these contribute to making the stores more than mere spaces of the buying and selling of commodities, and more than mere sites for competitive game-play. I documented the importance of the shared preparation of food, the everyday sharing of food and drinks, and how these, together with the exchange of tangible and intangible objects, facilitate social interactions between players and customers and store employees and store owners. Spaces in which TCGs are played have two primary roles, firstly as stores where players and collectors can buy merchandise. Secondly, these spaces provide a space for players to gather and interact with one another. TCG spaces like Dragon Town and Geek Home designate space, tables and chairs for players to participate in serious and casual leisure activities. Furthermore, having designated days such as Friday Night *Magic* and weekend tournaments designates a time during the week for players to interact with one another and their interests. The benefits given to OTS' and LGS' also incentivise players to gather at stores and participate in group activities like tournaments.

I also showed how the social ties that result from these interactions in the context of commodified leisure, are complex and overlapping, with players often also occupying the role of customer or employee, and even as teammates in national or regional competitions. Very few of the individual research participants who participate in this research occupy only one role; most of them combine and shift between multiple roles. These overlapping social ties do strengthen the social relationships between members of the trading card playing community, and reduce the risk of free-riders and chancers who may seek to take advantage of members of the community. Because there is a sense of being part of a larger trading card playing community, even the individual stores have to temper their pursuit of profit-making so as not to step on the toes of loyal customers and they have to take into consideration inequalities that exist within the wider South African society. By documenting the variety of activities and social interactions that take place in these two stores, I was able to present dynamics relating to the wider community of trading card games. This dissertation did not include the kinds of relationships and dynamics that are at play in the online life of the trading card playing community, not because there are not important, but because I assumed it would be easier to document and understand the social implications of commodified leisure by doing research on the offline aspects of this community. Further research on the online social interactions and activities of this community may well qualify some of the arguments I present here.

Through their participation in serious and casual leisure, players meet and interact with new players. Some find that coming to a TCG store is a form of escape and that it is a way to leave some of the stressors of work and home behind. Players may initially attend tournaments and participate in games to engage with their interests but also engage in non-play social interactions with other players. TCGs like *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* are social by design. Players cannot play *Magic* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* without speaking to another player or employee at the store. Stores in which TCGs are played are spaces that facilitate collaboration and social interaction. Employees and players alike interact with one another and form close personal, and sometimes professional, relationships.

I also documented the main role players in this community, but was unable to include the transnational corporations as active research participants in this study. Future studies may well want to document and understand more explicitly the relationship

between the local and global aspects of commodified but serious leisure forms. Despite this, I was able to present information on the individuals who form a part of this leisure community, by introducing the research participants and allowing some of them to speak throughout the dissertation. A study such as this can never include all the members of a subculture or fandom, but I think the material I presented gives an accurate portrayal of this community as it looks while research was conducted. By offering a discussion on how one can become a trading card player, including how I became a trading card player, I utilised auto-ethnography not only to document how I moved from an outsider to an insider of sorts, but to show the importance of learning and mentorship in the card playing community. While hierarchies clearly exist, members of this community make an effort to accept newcomers and to mentor newcomers by gifting them cards, teaching them the rules, and adjusting their playing behaviour so as to encourage newcomers to learn. I found this a remarkable aspect of the community and it was one of the reasons why I would persevere in field research. The rituals of opening a “sealed product” and hunting for a specific card, allowed me to understand the importance of hierarchies among trading card players. Yet, I expected more competitiveness among players and for the hierarchies to be more explicit and even crude. I think this expectation came from my reading of fandom literature from the USA, where commodified leisure often becomes an obsession and where competition trumps collective action and collaboration. In my experience, there was a real attempt to underplay hierarchies, and to make individual wealth not an important factor in creating hierarchies. More emphasis was placed on skills and knowledge and ultimately on friendship. While not every person can become a trading card player – it costs money and access to transport and forms of social and cultural capital that makes it a middle-class leisure activity – an effort was made not to allow individual wealth to result in some players building up such strong decks that would make them unbeatable. Interestingly, the stores here played a role as a referee of sorts in the wider community, not allowing individuals to abuse their wealth by accumulating an unbeatable deck of cards.

While some members of this community engage with the game and the community in a casual manner, for some this is terribly serious. And they achieve this not through the sharing of personal gifts that stand in opposition to impersonal commodities that alienates those that exchange it, as anthropologists have often argued, but through

cards and merchandise and other commodity objects created by transnational corporations. Commodities come to play an essential role in the interactions between members of this community; in fact, it is not difficult to see that the commodities in fact assemble all the actors. As I showed, players will often give each other gifts and teach each other about cards and how to play. The production, sale and consumption of commodities and business ventures by employees, customers and players play an important role in building social relationships. Furthermore, these interactions with commodities allow the stores and games to grow as a business and in the wider playing community. Both employees of the store and players will participate in the labour required to host events, introduce new players to a TCG and ensure that players come back to the store to continue playing a particular TCG. Much of the labour is unpaid, and voluntary, underscoring the seriousness with which players approach this leisure form.

The literature shows the personal benefits of leisure activities more generally, and that of also trading card games. I documented some of the social implications of becoming and being a trading card player in Gauteng. Specifically, I pointed to the kinds of social relationships that could be formed in commercially owned spaces, even as more and more urban youth find it difficult to find public leisure spaces. Because of my own experience of making kin through commodified forms of leisure, and because of the few public spaces available for people like me to form social ties of friendship, I felt it important to argue that the social relationships that are being formed through this form of commodified leisure transcends friendship. It may also be a generational view, but for myself and other young people, friends literally are family. Whether this is related to the decline of the traditional nuclear family, or to the decline of marriage, or to changes in capitalism, is not a question I seek to answer here. What I do argue is that the social relationships I observed, and also created, through this commodified leisure form, are not only serious but important for making life in our city. Those who make lives in cities are always confronted with the opportunity or challenge to turn strangers into friends. Trading card games, I suggest, allow me and some of the research participants to turn strangers into kin.

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## Appendix A

### Letter of Invitation

Dear...

I am Qudisiyah Vahed, a Masters student from the Department of Anthropology, Archaeology and Development Studies at the University of Pretoria. I completed my

BA and Honours degrees at UP, and am now registered for my Masters. I am writing to ask if you would consider participating in my research, entitled 'Productivity in Participatory Culture: An anthropological study of Japanese anime fandom in Gauteng, South Africa'.

### **What is this research, and why am I inviting you?**

My research will be about consumers and fans of Japanese anime in South Africa, specifically in Gauteng. I am myself a fan. Japanese anime has been growing in popularity in South Africa, but this issue has not yet been documented and analyzed through academic research. My research aims to fill this gap. In order to understand its growing popularity, and how the anime fandom in Gauteng forms a community, I want to interview sellers and distributors of anime and manga as well as anime fans and collectors. Since your organization operate in this space, I would value your contribution to this research. I am particularly interested in the social structure of the anime fandom in Gauteng. The title of my research project is: Productivity in participatory culture: An anthropological study of Japanese anime fandom in Gauteng, South Africa.

Participation would entail interviewing staff from your organisation who work on or have knowledge about Japanese anime/manga in South Africa. I plan to conduct between two and three interviews per individual, and to limit these interviews to 45 minutes each. I recognise that time is scarce and will accommodate interviewees' wishes in this regard. According to the ethical guidelines from the University of Pretoria, and the Association of Anthropology Southern Africa, research respondents should participate in research only if they are informed fully about the nature of the research, know that their participation is voluntary, and that they can refuse to answer any question without penalty. To this end, ethical clearance from the Faculty Research Committee at UP to conduct this research requires a Permission Letter from organizations willing to participate in the research. It is standard practice to allow research respondents and participating organisations to decide whether they want their personal names or the name of the organisation they work for to be used or kept confidential through the use of a pseudonym. If I am given permission to interview

people from your organisation, I will ensure that no harm will come to research participants or your organisation.

### **How do we proceed?**

While there will be no direct benefit to your staff or organisation as a result of this research, your knowledge and experience of Japanese anime/manga would contribute to knowledge of this field. If you would like to discuss my participation request in more detail, or if I can send you a draft/example Permission Letter, please do not hesitate to contact me on 0720343034 or [u18076832@tuks.co.za](mailto:u18076832@tuks.co.za). In case you want to direct a query to the Academic Supervisor of my research project, you are welcome to contact Dr Detlev Krige (University of Pretoria, e-mail). I would greatly appreciate your insight and time if you agree to participate.

Kind regards,

Qudisiyah Vahed

[U18076832@tuks.co.za](mailto:U18076832@tuks.co.za)

## Appendix B

### Letter of Informed Consent

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Qudisiyah Vahed. I am a Masters student at the University of Pretoria. For my Masters degree, I am doing conducting research on anime fans in South Africa. The title of my project is “Productivity in participatory culture: An anthropological study of Japanese anime fandom in Gauteng, South Africa”.

I would be very grateful if you would consider participating in this research project, and this document is to explain in detail what the purpose of the study is, who the research participants will be, why you have been invited to participate, and what such participation will mean should you agree to participate.

## **The purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate anime fans and fan culture in Gauteng, in particular what it might reveal about gender, violence, race, power and hierarchy in urban South Africa. I aim to explore the identity and dynamics of the anime fan community in Gauteng, South Africa and if the anime fandom is growing and changing. I seek to find what produces hierarchies among fans and what distinguishes fans from other South Africans.

## **Criteria for inclusion and exclusion for the study**

Your knowledge and experience regarding the anime fandom in Gauteng, South Africa would be invaluable to this study. This applies to whether you are currently a fan of anime, are in a position that allows you to be in close proximity to anime fans or have knowledge on the fandom. As a research participant you must be between the ages of 18 and 65. I welcome contributions from all, irrespective of race or gender.

## **Participation in the study**

If you consent to participate in this research, you will be expected to answer a series of interview questions outlined in an interview schedule. These questions will be based on your knowledge and experience of being a fan of anime, interacting with anime fans, items produced for/by fans (such as items of clothing) and/or your personal perceptions on anime fans and the fandom as a whole. These questions will allow me to gain knowledge and understandings on the inner workings of the anime fandom and the ways in which anime fans create hierarchies and interact with one another. As a research participant, you will participate in two or three interviews, and a focus group with other participants if it is possible, which will take between thirty to forty minutes each. These interviews can take place in person or online, whichever you are most comfortable with and is most convenient. In person interviews can take place in the workplace, in a coffee shop or other location. During the interviews I will be taking notes on our conversation. There are no right or wrong answers and no judgement in

these interviews. My main goal is to understand your perspectives and honest opinions.

### **Withdrawal from the study**

This research is voluntary and as a research participant you have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any questions with no penalty. I would like to reiterate that during interview process there are no right or wrong answers or judgements being made. I am interested in understanding your perspective on the questions posed.

### **Anonymity and confidentiality**

I will conduct research in line with the ethical guidelines of the University of Pretoria and the Association of Anthropology Southern Africa. This means that my research will be based on voluntary, informed and dynamic consent and I will strive to protect my research participants. Research participants decide whether or not they would like their name and the names of any organisations to be kept confidential and their information to be kept anonymous. By providing the option of anonymity to both research participants and the organisation overall I will respect your right to privacy. Be aware that all of the data I obtain and use in my research will be done so with explicit consent and awareness on your part and that of any organisations if necessary (Anthropology Southern Africa, 2005). This Letter of Consent and the Consent Form which you sign prior to taking part in the interview process binds me as a researcher to your anonymity and confidentiality as a research participant insofar as it is agreed upon by us.

### **Benefits from taking part in this research**

There will be no direct benefit to you as a participant in this study. By participating in this study, you will contribute to the improvement of knowledge on the anime fan community in South Africa, specifically the social aspects of the fandom. This knowledge may in turn be used by other members of the scholarly community.

### **Anticipated risks of taking part in this study**

There are minimum risks or discomfort involved in taking part in this study. It is my responsibility as a researcher to protect you as a research participant from harm (personally or professionally) which may come as a result of taking part in this study. My main focus in this research is to understand the anime fandom and fans. I do not aim to cause any harm to yourself as a research participant or any organisation involved. To, mitigating any possible personal or professional backlash, for example. To avoid this, you may decide whether your personal names or the name of any organisation should be kept confidential, and your information therefore to be kept anonymous, except where information is already in the public domain. Explicit permission to use any information which is not in the public domain is provided by the research participant as well as any organisations by understanding this Letter of Consent and signing the Consent Form.

### **Protection and security of data**

This data will be securely stored for fifteen years electronically at the University of Pretoria in the Department of Anthropology, Archaeology and Development Studies. The data may be used for future studies, but this will not compromise the undertakings I made with regards to confidentiality and anonymity.

### **Usage of the research data**

This data will be used for the purposes of this dissertation. This data may also be used in the case of a conference and for publication in an academic journal or other publication.

### **Remuneration for participation**

There will be no remuneration for taking part in this study.

### **Ethics approval for this study**

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. The ethical approval number is... A copy of the approval letter can be provided to you on request.

#### Contact details of researcher and supervisor

##### Researcher

Qudisiyah Vahed

072 034 3034

U18076832@tuks.co.za

##### Supervisor

Dr Detlev Krige

Detlev.krige@up.ac.za

# Appendix C

## Consent Form



Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe  
Lefapha la Bomocho

Humanities

### Consent Form

Collecting data on 'Productivity in Participatory Culture: An anthropological study of Japanese anime fandom in Gauteng, South Africa'.

I, Kyeon Jaubert ..... agree to voluntarily participate in this research.

- I understand that even though I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences for doing so.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use part or all of the data from my interview within a reasonable time of at least two weeks after the interview.
- The purpose and nature of the interview have been explained to me in writing and I have also had the opportunity to ask questions concerning the use of the interview.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research. However, my participation will be valuable to the study.
- Please circle the appropriate choice regarding recording the interview below:

Anonymity by using a pseudonym/alias	Yes/No
Audio recording of interviews	Yes/No

X

*[Signature]*

Research participant

X

Date

X

*[Signature]*

Researcher

X

23/11/23

Date

Room 8-15, Humanities Building  
University of Pretoria, Private Bag X20  
Hatfield 0028, South Africa  
Tel +27 (0)12 420 2595  
Email: Detlev.krige@up.ac.za | www.up.ac.za

## Appendix D

### Permission Letter Geek Home

To Whom It May Concern,

I, Joe Eckard, give permission to Qudisiyah Vahed to engage with customers, conduct interviews with staff and customers with their permission and participate in fan activities at the store, Dragon Town, for the purpose of her research titled "Productivity in Participatory Culture: an Anthropological Study of the Japanese Anime Fandom in Gauteng, South Africa". (Dragon Town does not have an official letterhead.)

Best regards,

Joe Eckard

Director of Dragon Town



Signed on: 12/10/2022



Diamond Park #4

70 Jakaranda Street

Hennospark

Centurion

0157

## Permission Letter The Geek Home

To Whom It May Concern,

I Casper Kleynhans, give permission to Qudisiyah Vahed to engage with customers, conduct interviews with staff and customers with their permission and participate in fan activities at the store, The Geek Home, for the purpose of her research titled "Productivity in Participatory Culture: an Anthropological Study of the Japanese Anime Fandom in Gauteng, South Africa".

Regards

Casper Kleynhans

Owner

X

Signature



X

Date 2023-03-17

(If possible please add company letterhead here)

Extreme Wargaming c.c.  
T/A The Geek Home  
Reg. no. 2009 / 198927 / 23

Postal address:  
620 spes bona road  
Moreleta Park  
Shop 8  
Pretoria

0044

Cel. 079 309 4262

Address of registered office:  
620 spes bona road  
Moreleta Park  
Shop 8  
Pretoria

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Email: extremewargaming@gmail.com