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***“It's not numbers, and it's not just usernames”:*
Exploring the Mediated Relationships Between
Twitch Streamers and Their Viewers**

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Sociology PhD

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Lay Summary of Thesis

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Twitch is a livestreaming platform where 3.8 million broadcasters, known as 'streamers' go live to over 200 million viewers. Twitch was initially developed as a site for live gaming content but has grown to cover a wide range of content such as live music and sport. On Twitch, streamers can communicate with their viewers, who type messages in the chat, that are shown in real-time during the stream. Viewers can show support for streamers by paying a subscription to them each month, or through tips. Some streamers receive enough financial support so that streaming can become their full-time job.

This thesis explores the relationships between streamers and their viewers and data was collected from 32 interviews with women and non-binary people who stream on Twitch, as well as from observing Twitch streams.

The first data chapter covers gender and looks at how women and non-binary people are treated on Twitch, in particular, analysing how viewers police their behaviour in accordance with stereotypical ideas of gender. The second data chapter examines the labour of streamers and how they stream on Twitch, including how they communicate with their audience. The third and fourth data chapters look at how streamers and their viewers form close relationships, such as through sharing personal information, and also how they protect themselves by setting rules for how they communicate with their viewers through boundaries. The fifth data chapter covers authenticity and explores how streamers think about being authentic, and why it matters to them.

This thesis explores how the relationships between Twitch streamers and their viewers develop, and the challenges that come with the two-way communication that Twitch allows.

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Abstract

On Twitch, a livestreaming platform, 3.8 million broadcasters, known as ‘streamers’ go live to over 200 million viewers (Ruby, 2023). Initially developed for gaming-centred content, Twitch has since branched out to cater to a wide range of interests, such as live music, art, conversation, and sport. A key component of streaming on Twitch involves communicating with users, who send messages in the chat box that accompanies streams through which streamers and viewers can have two-way conversation in real-time. For streamers that gain a substantial number of viewers, Twitch offers monetisation through first gaining Affiliate status, and then Partner status, allowing streamers to earn money from viewers subscribing to their channels and donating cash tips and Twitch’s own virtual currency of ‘Bits’.

Although Twitch is seeing growing academic interest, it has received less attention than other social media and content creation platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube. In addition, much of the prior research on Twitch and livestreaming more broadly centres around the technical aspects of streaming, whilst the relationships which form between streamers and their viewers remain under researched. To address this gap in the literature, this thesis explores the complex relationships that develop between Twitch streamers and their viewers, examining the multifaceted nature of these connections through the analysis of factors that impact their development and maintenance. The data collection for this research commenced with unstructured observation on the platform to learn about how streamers engage with their viewers. From this observation and from the literature on social media and personal relationships, key themes emerged which formed the basis for the semi-structured interviews with 32 streamers. This research focuses specifically on the experiences of women and non-binary streamers on Twitch as, from this observation, gender appeared to play a significant role in how streamers navigate the platform and the relationships they form.

The first theme examined in this thesis is the impact of gender on the experiences of women and non-binary streamers, noting the ways in which their gender identity, and viewers’ perception of this identity, impact how they are treated on the platform. Streamers’ presentation and behaviour is often subjected to policing and intense scrutiny from viewers, who use the chat function afforded by Twitch to enforce gendered expectations. Women and non-binary streamers often encounter misogynistic and transphobic abuse, criticism, and hostility due to their online presence, restricting the potential depth of relationships they can establish with their viewers. The labour of streamers also impacted the dynamics of their relationships with viewers on Twitch. For earning money and achieving Affiliate and Partner status, success on the platform is reliant on forming relationships with viewers. Aspirational labour plays a vital role as streamers look to expand their channels, whilst also engaging in affective and emotional labour to generate positive impressions from their viewers. This thesis then explores how intimacy is developed in the relationships between streamers and their viewers. Streamers build communities around their streams through attracting regular viewership, disclosing personal information, with reciprocal communication through the use of the chat, and creating a sense of providing support and care for each other. Alongside developing intimacy with viewers, the data suggests that maintaining boundaries is crucial to upholding an environment that nurtures meaningful connections, as well as safeguarding streamers’ mental wellbeing, privacy, and safety. Thus, this thesis examines how a form of intimacy and meaningful connection is achieved through the implementation of moderators, chat rules, and limiting self-disclosure in order to preserve such a balance. Authenticity plays a crucial role in shaping the relationships between streamers and their viewers on Twitch and

defining and understanding authenticity within the context of live streaming from participant-generated definitions provides vital insight into how they form genuine connections. Streamers perform authenticity by sharing personal information, including vulnerabilities in order to relate to their viewers and provide an engaging environment. Finally, performing authenticity on Twitch also offers complications through the financial component of streaming from sponsorships and monetary incentives, with streamers' transparency about such financial incentives forming a significant factor in being trusted by their audience.

This thesis offers a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted relationships between Twitch streamers and their viewers by revealing the ways in which the streamers form relationships with their viewers, and the complexities and challenges that arise from the reciprocity of communication afforded by Twitch. The findings from this research contribute to existing scholarship on personal relationships, digital media, and online communities, through the provision of valuable insights and new understandings of the ways in which online relationships are formed and maintained. Understanding these relationships will be crucial in shaping the future of digital media landscapes, particularly for women and non-binary users, as livestreaming platforms such as Twitch continue to grow in popularity and evolve to encompass an ever-expanding array of content.

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Lastly, I wish to express my gratitude to all the participants of this research for so readily sharing their experiences, ideas, and knowledge with me. Thank you for your time and for the amazing insight into being a streamer.

Introduction

The screen is shades of purple, with the whole page covered with an animated background with the words 'Starting Soon' featured in pink and yellow lettered cursive font at the bottom-left of the screen. On the top left there is a reference to a sponsorship, complete with the company logo. The animation depicts a woman sat in a computer chair in a black dress, patterned with crescent moons, drinking from a mug. Around her are animated cats, plants, fairy lights, and a bright computer screen. In the background, fast-paced dance music plays, as viewers trickle into the chat, announcing their arrival by posting emotes, which appear both in the chat box, but also on the right-hand side of the animation screen. After a few minutes, the music fades and a voice greets viewers, "Hello, hello, hello, lovely people! Welcome Back!"

She says 'Hi' to each message in the chat, and thanks the first subscribers of the stream. Suddenly, the screen fills with a collage of a meme of cats holding hearts, to transition as she switches her camera on. As the cat memes disappear from the screen, we return to the stream where the animated screen has been replaced with a live feed of streamer Radders. Today she is building a Lego set of a flower bouquet, and her viewers are there to watch, and offer encouragement.

Radders is a full-time streamer, with over 29,000 followers on Twitch, a real-time, interactive, livestreaming platform which affords direct engagement between streamers and their viewers through a chat interface, allowing viewers to communicate with the streamers, and each other. Radders plays popular video games like *God of War* and *Resident Evil 4* to an audience of thousands and is one of 3.8 million broadcasters on Twitch, contending for the attention of 200 million users (Ruby, 2023).

Twitch originated in 2011 as a subsidiary of Justin.tv, as a livestreaming website that was initially launched in 2007 for gaming content. (Taylor, 2016). By 2013, the success of Twitch resulted in it becoming independent from Justin.tv and two years later it was acquired by Amazon's subsidiary Amazon Web Services for almost \$1 billion dollars (Gittleson, 2014). In the years since, Twitch has expanded its offerings, catering to a wide range of interests, however, gaming is still at the heart of Twitch, with streamers finding an audience for any video game, from new releases to obscure retro playthroughs. Beyond gaming, Twitch has expanded to encompass other forms of creativity such as art, music, make-up tutorials, as well as educational content. *Just Chatting* streams are also popular, accounting for hundreds of thousands of viewers at any given moment, with streamers engaging with their viewers, discussing current events, and storytelling. Furthermore, Twitch has established itself as the place to watch live sporting events, with streamers providing commentary and even hosting their own tournaments, such as popular Spanish streamer Ibai's boxing event, which drew 3.4 million viewers (Serrano, 2023).

Much of the focus centres around the interactivity between streamers and their viewers as on Twitch, users can communicate with each other as part of the live broadcast in real-time, creating a sense of co-presence and connection. Twitch's popularity has driven the emergence of streaming as a career, which opens up opportunities for individuals to build a following. This also raises questions around digital labour, fair compensation, and safety on the platform. Those, like Radders, who are able to bring in large numbers of viewers can

earn a living on the platform, using a range of monetisation techniques such as through Twitch's Partner programme, and also sponsorships and merchandise sales. For others, streaming can be a way of socialising, rather than a career, without financial compensation.

I currently follow approximately fifty channels on Twitch, and typically enjoy having Twitch streams playing in the background as I work. As a result, I was able to start this research with a strong familiarity with not just the platform but also streaming communities, language used across the platform, and broader knowledge about gaming. I also felt a deep, personal connection to this research. Twitch is a platform that I feel strongly attached to, given the amount of time I have spent watching streams; the streamers' mannerisms and patterns of speech becoming as familiar as those of friends, which was only strengthened at a time with COVID-19 lockdowns, and social isolation. Through the countless hours I have spent on the platform, I developed a curiosity about the ways in which relationships are formed between streamers and their viewers. This was particularly inspired by my role as a 'lurker' in streams, for which I was often a regular viewer but rarely engaged in the chat. I noticed how streamers developed familiarity with their viewers, often being able to recognise one viewer out of the thousands of individuals watching, remembering information about them, checking in after they had been absent for a while. I also observed how streamers used the term 'community' to describe their viewers, usually referencing their support through their regular virtual presence, frequent communication, financial contributions, and in return, streamers engaging with viewers in their chat, with both viewers and streamers sharing experiences and offering comfort and support. Whilst I observed the development of relationships on Twitch, I also noted how boundaries were enacted, as streamers set rules for their chats, and appointed moderators to act on their behalf. Such boundaries also extended to self-censorship, as streamers refrained from discussing personal information about themselves or their families, which was particularly evident against a backdrop of high-profile cases of in-person threats towards streamers from leaks of their identifiable information. Within these parameters for interaction, I also questioned how streamers viewed authenticity, given their role as a content creator that receives financial donations from viewers which can potentially influence their content and the dynamics of these relationships. It was also my connection to Twitch that encouraged me to examine the ways in which women, including transgender women, and non-binary users navigated the platform, often building relationships around shared marginalised characteristics, such as being trans, but against a backdrop of abusive messages and policing of bodies. As a viewer, watching streamers playing video games, chess, or music, whilst viewing chat messages joking about sexual assault, felt like less-than-subtle messaging telling me I am not welcome in this space. I knew that conducting this research could start some important conversations about the culture of Twitch, whilst also placing the focus on the work of women and non-binary individuals, who shoulder much of the abuse on the platform. Through this, I hoped to simultaneously demonstrate the depths of the relationships they hold with their viewers, whilst challenging behaviours on the platform that seek to drive them away from Twitch, and as in the case of one of my participants, succeed at this.

The data for this thesis was collected between March and June 2021, with 32 semi-structured interviews completed with women and non-binary streamers. Interviews took place primarily over Zoom, but also using Twitter and email for several, as well as for follow-up interviews. Participants were recruited using Twitter and were found either on Twitter through my post advertising the research, which gained significant traction, or from direct messages to participants. The participants have a range of followings, from 41 followers to 40,000 and streamed content including gameplay, music, cosplay, and conversation streams. The

participants were all aged between 18-40 years old at the time of the interviews and are predominantly from the UK and the USA.

This thesis has five core data chapters covering: gender cultures and gendered experiences of streamers; the labour of streamers; building intimacy and community; developing and maintaining boundaries; and presentations of authenticity on Twitch. The main aim of this research is to explore the relationships between streamers and their viewers, focusing on the experiences of women and non-binary streamers. This research offers the first examination of these relationships which brings together and critically analyses gender, labour, intimacy, boundaries, and authenticity, discussing where these themes intersect. This thesis offers valuable contributions to the expanding body of literature on streaming, gender cultures, personal relationships, and technology studies by providing insights into how relationships develop on Twitch and through livestreaming.

Alongside the interviews, much of this thesis was informed through “lurking” (Joseph and Black, 2012: 491) on Twitch, watching streams and being counted amongst the anonymous viewers, without actively participating. This observation was primarily unstructured, as I did not predetermine the data I hoped to collect. This in turn allowed me flexibility to find points of interest, which ultimately guided the creation of interview questions. During the streams in which I was lurking, I would take detailed notes on the behaviour of both the streamer and the viewers, particularly when there was interaction between the two. Through this process I was also able to learn more about the technology used in streaming and stream-specific jargon so that I was up-to-date and informed prior to interviews. Throughout this research, I aimed to centre the experiences of the participants such as using semi-structured interviews and encouraging participants to bring my attention to new themes and ideas. I also checked in with participants further on in the process, to ask their thoughts on different topics, and to give them updates on my findings.

Chapter 1: Literature Review places this thesis within the existing literature on personal relationships and technology studies and outlines the contributions from this research, identifying key themes which contributed to the work in this thesis. This literature review also highlights the gaps within the literature such as in the study of personal relationships on livestreaming platforms, such as Twitch, and indicates where this research aims to contribute.

Chapter 2: Methods outlines the research design applied in this thesis. This chapter discusses the research questions, which were designed to investigate key themes of gender, labour, intimacy, boundaries, and authenticity, with the aim of examining how these themes impacted the relationships which formed between streamers and their viewers. Data collection for this thesis took place in the spring of 2021, using semi-structured interviews conducted with 32 participants using Zoom, and observational data collected through ‘lurking’ in streams on Twitch. The data collected was transcribed and analysed thematically to allow key themes to emerge from the data. Furthermore, this chapter will also discuss how this research centres the experiences of participants by encouraging them to generate their own understandings and definitions, allowing them to pull this research towards previously unconsidered themes and ideas.

Chapter 3: Gender and ‘Toxic Technocultures’ on Twitch discusses the gendered experiences of participants on Twitch, with particular attention paid to the ways in which their gender identity affects their labour on the platform. This chapter will first examine the misogynistic culture that prevails on Twitch, examining its origins in gaming culture more broadly,

including the movement across social media to exclude women alongside other marginalised groups including Black people and LGBTQIA+ people from gaming. This chapter then discusses hot tub streamers, a phenomenon that grew exponentially during the time of the interviews for this research in 2021. I analyse participants' reactions to hot tub streamers and their perceived impact on their own experiences on the platform. This chapter then focuses on the expectations of women and non-binary streamers, firstly in their physical appearance and clothing, but also in what games they play and how they are expected to behave on Twitch. In these sections, participants detail the pressures they feel to conform to expected standards, enforced by viewers in what is seen as culturally acceptable scrutiny. For transgender and non-binary streamers, this pressure can be multiplied as they fight to have people respect their gender identity, which can be dependent on how they dress and behave. This chapter contains discussions around experiencing marginalisation, misogyny, racism, and transphobia, and demonstrates how streamers often face such behaviour because of their presence in these online environments, and as such, the depth of the relationship that they can build with their viewers may have limitations.

Chapter 4: The Labour of Twitch Streamers covers the labour of streamers, examining how they build their Twitch channels, the time they spend on the platform, and the hidden labour that takes place off-stream. Streaming falls within conceptions of “aspirational labour”, which Duffy (2017) describes as “a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of getting paid to do what you love” (5). Within this type of labour, the focus remains on working potential, instead of earnings in the present. This leaves opportunities such as channel monetisation, sponsorships, and other financial gain as an aim for the future, whilst streaming for little to no money in the present. Twitch is a greatly oversaturated market, with over 8.35 million monthly streamers and as a result, only the top 0.015% of all streamers on the Twitch are able to earn above the median US household income from Twitch alone (Wilde, 2021), although many have sponsorship from other companies to supplement their earnings. For women, this ambition can seem even further out of reach. Of the top 100 most followed streamers, only 3 are women (Irwin, 2021). Whilst there is little to no research on non-binary Twitch streamers, we know that men make up 65% of users on the platform (Dean, 2023), with women and non-binary individuals making up a significantly smaller proportion of users. The labour of streamers centres around developing communities, building viewership, and encouraging users to post in the chat. Much of this labour can take place away from Twitch, using other forms of social media to build their online presence and engage with viewers. Nearly all the participants had work outside of Twitch, and thus the balance between their paid employment, free time, and Twitch was an important issue raised throughout the interviews, as participants noted the lack of a clear divide. This chapter highlights how this labour forms part of their relationships with viewers, as all success on the platform relies on building viewership and growing their channel, indicating the ways in which their labour intertwines with audience engagement and community-building.

Chapter 5: Intimacy, Co-Presence, and Community on Twitch centres around the theme of intimacy, examining the practices that build intimacy in relationships between Twitch streamers and their viewers. This chapter opens with a brief discussion of parasocial relationships, in which an individual forms a connection with someone they only know through media, in this case, a streamer. Following this section, this chapter then examines closeness and friendship on Twitch and how streamers understand these relationships. This chapter also discusses co-presence in virtual spaces, describing how it forms a vital part of building intimacy between streamers and their viewers. Twitch offers a platform for viewers

to interact with streamers and other viewers in real-time, creating a shared experience that has the potential to foster feelings of connectedness and closeness. A key theme in this chapter is the sense of community that is developed around Twitch streamers, which contributes to the development of intimacy and generates a sense of belonging amongst viewers. Finally, self-disclosure, support, and care are critical elements in the development of intimate relationships between Twitch streamers and their viewers. The sharing of experiences on Twitch means that users can gain insight from those who may have undergone comparable experiences by divulging their own encounters and interacting with other users. Through the mutual sharing of experiences, both streamers and viewers can feel that others care for them and are providing acknowledgment regardless of their physical location, all mediated by technology. Overall, this chapter aims to illustrate the relationships that streamers develop with their viewers, focusing on closeness, co-presence, community, and disclosure. This chapter will explore these factors in detail, highlighting the ways in which Twitch provides a unique platform for the development of intimate online relationships and allows them to build communities around their streams.

Chapter 6: Building and Maintaining Boundaries on Twitch covers the ways in which streamers implement boundaries for their streams, and the reasons why such measures are required. Throughout this chapter I highlight how maintaining boundaries forms a vital component of building relationships with viewers and draw attention to the approaches that streamers take to ensure their own wellbeing, privacy, and safety, alongside their viewers'. In this chapter, the online harms faced by streamers are discussed in depth, including trolling and online abuse, anonymity, the use of moderators, and censorship imposed, both by the platform and by the streamers. The abuse faced by streamers can cover a range of behaviours designed to disrupt and offend and can even escalate to physical safety concerns for streamers. As such, maintaining boundaries, for both personal safety and for emotional self-preservation, is of great importance to the participants. This chapter also discusses the role of moderators, a key defender of streamers, through their abilities to protect the streamer and their viewers from negative and abusive messages in the chat. The relationships that streamers form with moderators is one of the most important that streamers can have on Twitch, as they are granted privileges to keep the chat civil and safe, following the rules set by the streamer. This chapter closes by offering the participant's critiques and suggestions for Twitch policies, emphasising the responsibility on the platform to keep its streamers and its viewers safe.

Chapter 7: Performing Authenticity: The Challenges, Tensions and Paradoxes of Being Authentic on Twitch examines the portrayal and expectations around authenticity on Twitch. Authenticity and being authentic are themes that arose throughout each of the interviews, as participants discussed the desire and expectation for them to be authentic, as well as analysing the limitations on the ability to feel and to be perceived as such. Despite most streamers not being celebrities in the traditional sense, they are public figures, many with large followings, not only on Twitch but other social media platforms as well. As a result, being able to be their "true self" (Moulard et al. 2015: 175) is seen as key to their labour on Twitch. Ultimately, throughout this chapter I will build upon participants' own understandings of 'authenticity' and the experiences that they connect to their attempt, or lack of, to be 'authentic'. This chapter starts by building definitions of authenticity, using the participants' own understanding of the concept from which to build upon, before discussing key themes of performing authenticity, the value of authenticity, and the use of vulnerability to present authentically. The chapter will then discuss challenges with authenticity, such as understanding inauthenticity, including streaming in character on Twitch, and how these

relationships are impacted by the commercialisation of their exchanges and their viewers through the use of subscriptions, tips, and donations. From these understandings, insight will be drawn into the role that authenticity plays in the relationships that develop between streamers and viewers, highlighting the complexities and challenges that arise maintaining genuine connections amidst the transactional nature of financial support.

This thesis examines the lives of women and non-binary people on Twitch and presents detailed analysis of their experiences, told through in-depth qualitative interviews. In this thesis I aim to present a detailed exploration of the complex relationships between women and non-binary Twitch streamers and their viewers, examining their formation and maintenance, alongside the challenges that form through communication on the platform. From this research, I aim to contribute to wider scholarship on personal relationships, digital media, and online communities, offering new insights into an under-researched environment.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter firstly sets out to provide a comprehensive overview of the literature relevant to this research project whilst integrating and introducing the theoretical literature related to the various data themes discussed throughout this thesis. These themes include: gender cultures, labour, the development of intimacy in online connections, maintaining boundaries, and developing authenticity. This review highlights the existing body of literature connected to my inquiry, as well as indicating where my research can contribute to gaps within the current bodies of knowledge.

Numerous studies exist that observe the behaviours of consumers in digital worlds (Rihl and Wegener, 2019; Bleakley, 2014). These works largely focus on monetary behaviours (Törhönen et al., 2021) and online abuse (Ging and Siapera, 2018; KhosraviNik and Esposito, 2018). From such literature, observations have been drawn about the ways in which social media can be monetised, and about the targeted harassment of marginalised individuals across the internet. Current literature also offers insight into theoretical framings adopted for this research, including understanding online misogyny as “the product of systemic misogyny and sexism in the wider culture” (Ging and Siapera, 2018: 522).

Prior to starting this research, I noticed that within literature concerning personal relationships, and also within the literature on streaming, there is a substantial gap in knowledge concerning the relationships that evolve between streamers and their viewers. Whilst there is a rapidly growing quantity of literature on streaming, much of the focus remains on the technical aspects. Furthermore, within the literature on personal relationships (Jamieson, 2011; Derlega and Chaikin, 1977), there has been a considerable lack of attention given to the use of livestreaming as a way of connecting and building relationships online. This gap in the literature provided me with an opportunity to contribute and bring attention to the experiences of streamers themselves. This research fills this gap by offering data on the personal relationships that develop on Twitch and in doing so, contributes to a more robust understanding of online personal relationships, and digital media use more broadly, by highlighting the factors that impact their development. The gaps in the existing literature are important to fill as social media content is currently consumed by 4.62 billion users worldwide, spending an average of nearly 2.5 hours each day on social media (Kemp, 2022) and this is expected to further increase with the expansion of technologies and networks. With the use of such media increasing, it is relevant and important to understand how people are engaging and creating relationships and building networks and communities within these online environments. This research stands to offer novel and in-depth data to fill the gaps of relationship building within the literature and further highlights the need for more research with nuanced focus on relationships and community building within digital worlds.

The Emergence of Livestreaming

Well before the arrival of Twitch in 2011, much of livestreaming culture extends from webcam modelling: “webcam models are a cohort of sex workers who use highly stylized chat rooms to sell a range of erotic fantasy to online voyeuristic patrons—from benign

conversation to exotic strip tease to explicit sex acts” (Jones, 2015: 777). As technology advanced and became more widely accessible, the growth of camming, and live content more broadly, alongside the provision of free-to-watch content on the internet, such as YouTube, led to greater diversity of content.

One of the most publicised early streamers, or ‘camgirls’ was Jennifer Ringley, who set up a webcam in her student room, aged 19, which ran for close to eight years continuously. ‘Jennicam’ was not set up to be explicitly entertaining- Ringley stated, “I am not an actor or dancer or entertainer. I am a computer geek ... I don’t sing or dance or do tricks” (Smith, 2005: 92). Instead, the project allowed for viewers to log-in at any point in time and see the rooms, which were often empty, as Smith (2005) writes, “her absence rather than presence characterized the normality of Jennicam” (95). As such, Ringley’s stream indicates a trend that is still persistent today regarding the “malleability of activity and passivity” of livestreams (Smith et al., 2013: 137). For viewers, livestreams can occupy the space between the passiveness of watching television and the activity of playing video games, creating art, or having a conversation. As a result, both the viewer and the streamer can switch between playing more “active or passive roles” (Smith et al., 2013: 137). However, it was Ringley’s act of having sex with her boyfriend and masturbating, although comprising a very small amount of the time that she was on camera, that Hall (2015) argues created “one of the lasting legacies of the show and exemplifies some of the assumptions people bring to the representations of girls on the Internet”, whilst also expecting women to remain “authentic, revelatory, and available for consumption” (132).

Despite Jennicam being free-to-watch for any viewer clicking onto the website, Ringley also set-up a subscription service, which remains similar to the structures that exist today on Twitch and other streaming platforms. Whilst continuing to provide free content, some viewers are able to access perks by subscribing. For JenniCam, this involved getting images at a faster rate than free viewers, whilst for Twitch viewers, this involves watching streams without advertisements. As one of the first livestreaming sites, JenniCam laid the groundwork for the development of webcam-based platforms, including those which offer explicit sexual content (Jones, 2020: 51). Twitch also adopted a similar model of livestreaming, leaning away from sexual content and instead capitalising off the audience interest shown by JenniCam, with audiences drawn towards the vast array of content available and streamers’ personalities. Overall, JenniCam demonstrated the potential for real-time and personal content to hold the attention of audiences online, ultimately paving the way for the development of livestreaming platforms, such as Twitch.

Gender and Gender Cultures Online

One of the central themes in this thesis concerns gender and gender cultures online. Through the rise in social media platforms, individuals have been able to express and explore their identities whilst building virtual communities (Craig and McInroy, 2014). This section of the literature review explores the existing research on how gender cultures shape online communication, including the ways in which gender norms are enforced and/or subverted, and the challenges faced by marginalised gender identities in virtual spaces. The impact of gender on the labour of streamers interlinks with various themes relating to streaming, and thus in the following sections, this literature review will only be able to briefly discuss the major ideas and works related to this project.

Throughout this literature review and the thesis, Butler's (1990) understanding that "gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (278), is utilised which ultimately disconnects gender from any biologically determined qualities. Furthermore, this research also discusses how "gender classifications and their constituent roles intersect with other social identities such as class and race, and can be internalized, acted out, resisted, or followed in different ways in different situations via appearance, language, and behavior" (Martey et al., 2014: 2). Understanding the intersections of social identities forms a key element of the approach adopted for this research, which will be discussed in depth in the next chapter.

Writing on the relationship between video game culture and gender, through a Butlerian lens, Dargonaki (2018) outlines that as the streamer and their "constructed persona" is the main element of any stream, the "performative constitution of gender" is brought into sharp focus (108). As a result, "streamers repeat certain behaviours in order to become recognizable, taking on normative gender roles ... this stylized repetition of acts, which Butler understands as the process through which gender is constructed, ceases to be implicit and emerges to the foreground" (108). The normative gender roles on Twitch are further enforced by gender policing on the platform- a theme which has seen significant attention (Hatch and Randolph, 2021; Colosi et al., 2023; Evelyn et al., 2022). Kondakciu et al. (2022) identify two strategies used by individuals engaging in gender policing. The first is "bracketing", for which individuals can "selectively display certain aspects of their gendered selves based on their environment" (90), including across different social media platforms and offline. The second is actively choosing to "engage in misrepresentation" (91) in order to "avoid ridicule or judgment" (92). This idea is echoed by Harris and Vitis (2020) who state, "Online inequalities reflect and reinforce offline inequalities and are built into the design, architecture and governance of various technologies" (325). This is further exemplified by the research by Ruvalcaba et al. (2018), examining the experience of women in eSports, which found that women received eleven times the percentage of comments with sexual harassment compared to their male counterparts, demonstrating how language is used to "reinforce current realities" around gender (Kleinman, 2002: 300). Streamers on Twitch also face gender policing from the platform itself, as described by Zolides (2021) in their analysis of Twitch's platform policy documents and community discourse: "As a highly masculine space in terms of users (and workers), Twitch's moderation indeed privileges masculine forms of self-performance with extra scrutiny toward the bodies and sexual identities of women ... In turn, the community becomes primed to sexualize these performances and seek punitive measurements against women, reinforcing an ideologically masculine space in the name of platform integrity" (3002). In this setting, the language used both by users and through site policies "implicitly problematizes and sometimes sexualizes performances of femininity" (3002) and Zolides (2021) ultimately concludes that gender policing can result in those affected "being shut out from economic opportunities" (3013). Zolides' (2021) research emphasises the degree to which the behaviour of users around gender policing is closely linked to the language and policies implemented by Twitch and allows viewers to feel justified in scrutinising the bodies of women. For transgender and non-binary people on digital platforms, deviance away from preconceived assumptions about their gender can have further consequences; this will be discussed in greater detail further on in the literature review.

Research from Nakandala et al. (2017), who analysed one billion chat messages on Twitch, discovered that such messages are highly gendered; women received a significant volume of objectifying comments whilst men on the platform received chat messages predominantly

about their gaming. Nakandala et al. (2017) conclude that there is likely to be financial motivation for gender conformity, particularly to ignore and dismiss objectification from male viewers, who constitute the majority of viewers for many streamers stating, “such incentives may solidify the popularity of female streamers who do not address (or even encourage) objectification ... some women may feel they can only succeed in online streaming by giving in to the pressure of a gaming culture that normalizes or fetishizes the objectification of women” (170). Thus, some streamers may find financial value in working to “capitalize on structural and popular discourses of the female ideal” (Sanders, 2005: 336), enacting a strategic performance (Goffman, 1974: 523), alongside doing “emotion work” (Hochschild, 1983) to portray themselves as “available for consumption” (Hall, 2015: 132).

There has been significant research into the abuse of women online (Kurasawa et al., 2021; Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Harris and Vitis, 2020), alongside transgender and non-binary, people (Persaud and Perks, 2022; Powell et al., 2020). Social media sites, particularly those connected to gaming, feature what Massanari (2017) describes as “toxic technocultures”, referring to “retrograde ideas of gender, sexual identity, sexuality, and race” and a “push against issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and progressivism” (333). Such “toxic technocultures” also utilise “othering of those perceived as outside the culture, reliance on outmoded and poorly understood applications of evolutionary psychology, and a valorization of masculinity masquerading as a peculiar form of ‘rationality’” (333), which Zolides (2021) argues “become embedded into the platform through both community action and corporate language, like Twitch’s community guidelines” (3006).

Expectations about women online, particularly within a game-centred environment such as Twitch, are often based on assumptions about women’s knowledge and skill with games, as described by Jenson and Castell (2010): “Technological competence, so seen, has less to do with actual skills and more to do with construction of a gendered identity- that is, women lack technological competence to the extent that they seek to appropriately perform femininity; correlatively, men are technologically competent by virtue of their performance of masculinity” (54). Through this, Jenson and Castell (2010) highlight how skill with technology is seen as a masculine trait, and thus some people aligned more closely with feminine traits may be perceived as less competent- a finding echoed by Shen et al. (2016) who state that “the stereotype of female players as inferior is not only false, but it is also a potential cause for unequal participation in digital gaming” (325). As Twitch is predominantly a gaming platform, that requires knowledge of various technologies in order to livestream, as well as to show gameplay, the “technology cannot, therefore, be assumed to be a value-neutral tool” to be used “indiscriminately or free from social constructions of identity” (Jenson and Castell, 2010: 54).

Just as gender identity impacts heavily upon the experiences of platforms users, racial identities also influence the experiences and interactions of streamers and audiences. Women are especially targeted and ‘socially regulated’ on these platform and therefore it is important to note the “intersectional spectrum of harm to which women are exposed throughout their life-worlds and can intersect with other forms of discrimination and hate” (Harris and Vitis, 2020: 324), such as for women of colour, who experience both sexism and racism online. The term “misogynoir” was coined by Moya Bailey (2013) in order to “give intersectionality a break from doing a lot of the heavy lifting for Black feminist thought” (341) and is used to “describe the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience, particularly in US visual and digital culture ... the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the

intersection of racial and gender marginalization” (Bailey, 2021: 1). Madden et al. (2018) write about the digitally mediated misogynoir, examining the experiences of Black comedian and actress Leslie Jones as a case study. Madden et al. (2018) describe how the abuse directed at Leslie Jones was “complexity of the online space in regard to identity formation and an overall lack of humanization” (85). Marshall (2021), in her work analysing misogynoir in algorithmic content moderation, argues that “Content moderation can work towards creating inclusive, welcoming spaces for Black women, but current practices embrace misogynoir and then deploy it algorithmically” (5). Thus, it is important to acknowledge the role of social media platforms, such as Twitch, in enabling such behaviour, in particular the moderation which often fails to adequately address or prevent abusive content. Twitch also affords other ways to target individuals, such as through the use of emotes: site-specific images used regularly in the chat. On Twitch, emotes have been used to visually represent different groups, including by gender and race (Kim et al., 2022). Due to this creative approach to hate speech, the use of emotes as a replacement for text, which would be easier to catch by moderators, both human and automated, allows for targeted harassment of marginalised groups to go unchecked. Research from Kim et al. (2022) and Marshall (2021) highlights the impact of race online, which is further illustrated by Gray (2017), who states that “Black users and any user associated with Blackness are relegated to the periphery of the culture” (363) due to the “White, hegemonic masculine ideology” that prevails on Twitch.

Ruberg (2022) describes how although video games have been beneficial to many transgender people, by allowing them to explore their gender identities through different characters, stating, “many of the ways that trans lives and digital lives intersect today is through video games”. Transphobia within gaming culture “remains rampant” (201) with such transphobia becoming very apparent in multiplayer games and on game-centred platforms such as Twitch. The transphobia experienced can range significantly, from outright attacks to more subtle choices in language, used to “maintain the status quo” (Kleinman, 2002: 300). Nadal et al. (2012) identified twelve different categories of microaggressions, including the incorrect use of terminology, threats and harassment, and entitlement and objectification of trans bodies (64). Overall, transgender people are more likely than cisgender people to experience abuse online (Powell et al., 2020: 212), and are “targeted precisely because they hyper-visibly disturb normative notions of gender presentation” (Persaud and Perks, 2022: 483). Such behaviour is reinforced by the “toxic technocultures” (Massanari, 2015) across social media, particularly in regard to gaming platforms.

This thesis builds upon the work of Massanari (2015) in analysing the “toxic technocultures” present in Twitch streaming. This research draws attention to how gender cultures and gender policing limit the extent to which streamers can form intimate relationships with their viewers thus offering new understandings of how gender cultures on Twitch shape online interactions and influence the formation of communities. Additionally, this research contributes to the literature on race and gender within online worlds by highlighting the intersectional challenges faced by streamers, demonstrating how these identities further complicate the dynamics of intimacy and community-building on digital platforms.

Labour

This section examines the research on digital labour with a focus on affective labour (Hardt and Negri, 2004), emotional labour, and aspirational labour (Duffy, 2015: 3), alongside a

brief discussion of “algorithmic imaginary” (Bucher, 2017). Through the application of this literature, this thesis explores the aforementioned themes by analysing the ways in which various forms of labour affect the relationships that are developed between streamers and their viewers.

In their work on conceptualising digital labour, Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) adopt a Hegelian-Marxist framework in order to better highlight the ways in which workers within capitalistic societies experience alienation from all facets of work processes, thus resulting in exploitation. This thesis will uphold Fuchs and Sevignani’s (2013) ‘conceptual distinction’ between the terms ‘work’ and ‘labour’, opting to use ‘labour’ as it is a “necessarily alienated form of work, in which humans do not control and own the means and results of production... Work in contrast is a much more general concept common to all societies. It is a process in which humans in social relations make use of technologies in order to transform nature, culture and society in such a way that goods and services are created that satisfy human needs” (240). Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) apply this distinction to digital labour, emphasising the alienation that is present: “Digital labour is alienated from itself, the instruments and objects of labour and the products of labour. It is exploited, although exploitation does not tend to feel like exploitation because digital labour is play labour that hides the reality of exploitation behind the fun of connecting with and meeting other users” (22). On Twitch, this alienation can take the form of a lack of control over their decisions regarding their streams; producing content for sponsorships instead of from a genuine interest; and lack of flexibility over the content that they create, including when it does not align with their own values.

With online labour, particularly when it utilises social media, the lines between work and leisure time start to blur. Fumagalli (2018) discusses how the commodification of creative practice reduces these boundaries so that workers can never ‘clock-out’: “The capitalist system of production is marked by a continuous evolution of the organization of labour. In the moment when the waged labour is reduced, idleness and leisure are put to value... Far from entering the ‘end of work’ era, we are in the presence of an ‘endless work’ age” (Fumagalli et al., 2018: 11). Woodcock and Johnson (2019b) argue that “Twitch streaming has been shaped by a “neoliberal subjectivity” that depends on the entrepreneurship of the self, equating success as the result of hard work via the volume of hours streamed per week” (820). Therefore, Twitch streamers may feel like they must stream as much as possible, whilst the vast majority make very little money from this labour. However, for streamers there are other incentives to stream such as building a network of individuals centred around an interest, such as a particular game, sharing their passion with others. For some streamers, broadcasting on Twitch is an opportunity to show their creativity and skills, with regular streaming offering them dedicated time to work on such skills (Phelps and Consalvo, 2020: 2681).

Although the terms 'affective labour' and 'emotional labour' are frequently employed interchangeably, in this research it is beneficial to underline the nuances in each term in order to draw out conclusions about how streamers cultivate and maintain relationships with their viewers while managing the emotional demands of their presence on Twitch. Mäkinen (2021) makes the distinction that this thesis will adopt, clarifying that emotional labour “requires one to express or display in a sincere fashion feelings and emotions that might be very different from what one is actually feeling” (2967), following the work of Hochschild (1983). Alternatively, affective labour “allows the recognition of how capital harnesses social relations and affective intensities also outside or beyond the context of waged employment”

(2968). Ruberg and Cullen (2019) state how emotional labour plays an important role in livestreaming and identify three types of emotional labour undertaken by women streaming on Twitch: being entertaining for viewers, performing the emotions of excitement and interest in engaging with their audience, and achieving the “right mentality” for streaming. Streaming also involves “affective” labour, for which streamers’ labour “produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (Hardt & Negri, 2004: 108). Streamers are also required to “signal accessibility, availability, presence, and connectedness – and maybe most importantly authenticity – all of which presuppose and rely on some form of intimacy” (Raun, 2018: 99), outlining the complex relationship between affective labour and community building and intimacy with viewers. However, the consequences of affective labour can be “depleted agency constituted through the intersections of this labour with hierarchies” such as gender, race, and class (Whitney, 2017: 637), a theme that is examined throughout this thesis.

Whilst taking on affective and emotional labour as part of their role as streamers, users are also spending their time working towards goals, such as more viewers, being able to earn money from their streams, and gaining sponsorships. ‘Aspirational labour’ refers to “activities that hold the promise of social and economic capital” for which “the reward system for these aspirants is highly uneven” (Duffy, 2015: 3), such as those listed above. Under the guise of getting “paid doing what they love” (Duffy, 2015: 3), many Twitch streamers spend their time on the platform taking on labour that is “precarious, immaterial, aspirational” (Mendes, 2021: 2) and often unacknowledged, and invisible. Despite being “voluntarily given”, much of the labour of Twitch streamers remains “unwaged, enjoyed and exploited” (Tiziana, 2000: 33). On Twitch, in order to build their profile and increase their opportunities to grow and make money from their streams, users spend time “creating a broader ecosystem of media content and online community – which an aspirational streamer sits at the centre of” (Johnson, 2021: 10), requiring a considerable time investment off-camera. This involves creating an “authentic ‘personal brand’ via social networks” (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016: 194) as part of increasing their viewership and appealing to companies for sponsorship. Streamers also spend time analysing the statistics generated by Twitch for their streams, as a crucial part of their labour on Twitch, to understand how to improve (Johnson, 2021: 12). Twitch originally became known for livestreaming gameplay, and indeed, the majority of participants for this research also stream themselves playing games such as *Fortnite*, *Minecraft*, and *Dead by Daylight*. By playing these games, broadcasting live to their viewers, streamers bring their viewers’ attention to whichever game they are playing, providing a form of unstructured advertisement. Walker (2014) writes, “A game may be designed by a team of developers and distributed by a publisher, but now streamers - the majority of whom make little or no income from broadcasting—are its marketers” (438). Thus, streamers take on the unpaid and voluntary labour of advertising games but unless they partner with the video games company—something that is not widely offered to streamers, particularly those without an exceptionally large following— they are not compensated for this. For other creators such as artists, streamers broadcasting their creative processes may find that this adds a layer of accountability to their regular art creation and offers the opportunity to receive feedback from viewers (Phelps and Consalvo, 2020: 2681). Although such processes may help to improve their creative output, such as through regular practice, the streaming of art creation and other creative outlets requires additional labour, such as setting rules for chat about when and how to offer feedback, providing art education through explanations and tutorials, and working to grow an audience, as well to sell their art (Phelps and Consalvo, 2020).

An additional consideration when examining labour on Twitch comes from Lark (2022). Without fully theorising how intimacy is generated, Lark (2022) makes the connection between intimacy and domestic labour: “the performance and construction of the stream space is highly gendered, tapping into feminized notions of intimacy, affective labor, and domesticity to promote a sense of authenticity and social connection” (464). On Twitch, many streams, particularly those in the *Just Chatting* category often feature bedrooms as the background, which Ruberg and Lark (2021) note is more likely to be seen in streams from women rather than men, acknowledging the gendered element in such streams. In their research examining the “bedroom as a site of performance” (691), Ruberg and Lark (2021) argue that “all livestreaming, wherever it takes place, is an intimate, embodied, gendered” activity (691). Such use of the home, and more specifically the bedroom, as the setting for streams, provides an intimate insight into the homes of streamers, granting access to private spaces that are typically hidden from public view, allowing viewers to glimpse into the personal lives of streamers and establishing a sense of familiarity and connection between streamer and viewer. While a considerable body of literature has examined the relationship between gender and domestic labor (Fraiman, 2017; Fortunati, 2007; Weeks, 2007), the exploration of domestic labor within digital spaces remains relatively limited in comparison (although see: Lark, 2022; Arcy, 2016; Jarrett, 2014). Defining ‘domestic labour’ as the “unwaged labour of housework, child-bearing, and child-rearing” (Vogel, 2013: 184), domestic labour on Twitch may include maintaining the personal and often domestic space in which they stream. Given that many streamers, including all of the participants for this research, livestream from their home, this thesis will discuss how streamers’ use of domestic space to allow people backstage, giving privileged knowledge of themselves, is a gendered practice of generating a sense of intimacy.

Writing on computer game modification, or “modding”, Kücklich (2005) critiques the idea of “unpaid labour” of modders as “simply as an extension of play” (para. 4). Instead Kücklich coins the term “playbour” to highlight the commercialisation of labour that is “neither motivated directly by financial motives or coercion” (para. 32), in particular by the games companies themselves. Woodcock and Johnson (2019b) apply this idea in their research on Twitch labour, stating that streaming involves the “constant performance of their hobby, not in an individual, private sense—the enacting of gameplay in a digital environment—but in a public, closely watched, and monitored context, where performance translates directly into income” (219). As such “playbour” helps to underline the blurred boundaries between leisure time and labour, and the commodification of hobbies.

In their paper about entrepreneurship on webcam sites, van Doorn and Valthuis (2018) write about ‘hustle’ culture, which they describe as the aim to “exploit opportunities for action while keeping open diverse performance criteria in order to get paid ... a committed and honest yet cunning form of entrepreneurship that demands certain investments, most notably time” (185). According to Ticona (2022), a “digital hustle” refers to “digital labor that scaffolds paid work”, forming a “complex project that individuals mount to creatively navigate insecure labor markets. This project is undertaken in the hopes of securing paid work and managing existing gigs, but the work of the digital hustle itself is unpaid” (26). For Twitch, Johnson (2021) outlines four types of off-stream labour taken on by streamers. The first is creating the overlays to make a channel look unique and represent the streamer- this also includes graphics and notification sounds. The second type of labour listed by Johnson is networking, using social media and Twitch to build connections with other streamers, which can help their channel to grow. The third concerns building and maintaining their

communities of viewers, engaging with them on social media, and on Discord¹ servers. The fourth type of labour is managing the emails, sponsorships, and other labour for the channel, including choosing and supporting moderators (4). Such ongoing labour, that seeks to build the channels contributes towards the “disappearance of a clear distinction between life time and labour time” indicating “one of the distinctive traits of digital labour” (Fumagalli et al., 2018: 11).

Another factor that affects the labour of content creators on Twitch are the algorithms, defined as “sets of instructions written as code and run on computers” (Burrell and Fourcade, 2021: 215), employed by the platforms they use- not only on Twitch, but across the various social media platforms utilised by streamers to build their profile. As described by Dogruel (2021), “While users do not have full insight into how algorithms work, they observe algorithmic operations and experiment in their interactions with them, appropriating them where possible” (288). As social media users are often not privy to the finer details of the algorithms on the sites they use, and even make their financial living on, “algorithmic imaginary” (Bucher, 2017) or “folk theories” (Dogruel, 2021) are generated “in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible” (Bucher, 2017: 31). Such theories guide the behaviour of users, whilst also offering some insight into the workings of the platforms and are exemplified through the countless posts on Reddit and other social media platforms, with users questioning how the algorithm works, with theories generated about the best method for growing a Twitch channel, and ideas on why users have not yet experienced the success that they had hoped for.

Viewers on Twitch are able to purchase subscriptions to streamers they enjoy watching, paying a tiered subscription, approximately half of which goes to Twitch, whilst the other half goes to the streamer. The result of subscribing means that these viewers do not have to watch advertisements, which roll regularly for non-subscribers. In addition, they are given access to stream-specific emoticons to use in chat and their username is given an icon showing that they are a subscriber. This allows for streamers to see that they are a paying subscriber and may interact with this user more (Hamilton et al., 2014: 1316). Viewers can also donate or tip streamers, however, these do not give the viewer any perks such as advertisement-free viewing (Hilvert-Bruce, 2018: 60). In their research on the motivations of livestream viewers, Hilvert-Bruce et al. (2018) found that Twitch live-stream subscriptions and donations were motivated by “emotional connection, time spent, ...a desire for social interaction and sense of community” (65). Such motivations can be further enhanced by streamers’ approaches to discussing financial contributions, as Taylor (2018) writes: “Subscription requests framed as ‘Do you want to show your appreciation?’ or thankfulness from the streamer when donations are made highlight how the emotional connections between producer and audience are an important part of the economic system on the platform” (95). This demonstrates the complex interplay between economic transactions and emotional connections in the labour of streamers on Twitch. Subscriptions and donations serve as primary sources of income for streamers, but they also serve to reinforce a sense of community and emotional attachment between viewers and content creators. Moreover, the act of donating or subscribing is driven not just by monetary transactions but by a desire for social interaction and emotional connection. Thus, the labour of streamers on Twitch is not solely about creating entertaining content but also about fostering and maintaining emotional

¹ Discord is a platform in which users communicate on servers. Such servers are often created by streamers as a way of interacting with their viewers when they are off stream. Discord affords messaging, voice and video calls, and private chats through which the viewers can communicate with the streamer and with each other.

connections with their audience, which in turn drives financial support. This is a theme that this research will discuss throughout this thesis, analysing the role of affective labour in building the relationships with viewers.

This research seeks to contribute to discussions of labour on Twitch (Lark, 2022), (Taylor, 2018), (Johnson, 2021) and digital labour more broadly (Duffy, 2015) by drawing the connection between the labour of streamers and how it shapes the relationships that form on the platform. This thesis illustrates the intricate ways in which labour practices intersect with the formation and dynamics of relationships on Twitch and deepen understandings of the broader implications of labour within digital spaces.

Intimacy

This section of the literature review outlines the available research which explores and demonstrates the building of intimacy in digital worlds, whilst also including relevant literature from personal relationships offline.

Interactive digital platforms, such as Twitch, emerged primarily within the digital world of gaming. Currently, livestreaming services tend to rely more heavily on interactions between viewers and streamers and the body of literature reflects these trends. As described by Johnson and Woodcock (2019), Twitch “communities offer a feeling of closeness ... rarely matched in other media forms” (338), making the platform an ideal environment to examine the development of intimacy. Writing about the motivations of viewer engagement on Twitch, Hilvert-Bruce et al. (2018) continue this idea, stating that, “Unlike previous streaming services, such as television and YouTube, livestreaming offers real-time human interaction between the streamer and viewers, facilitating their ability to interact with each other” (58). Comments from viewers often centre around gameplay, letting the streamer know what they missed in a game, offering advice, indicating enjoyment of the stream, and more general discussion about the game. As a result, the “reciprocal nature of the performer’s persona as the one driving the content as well as reacting to commenters to alter the content helps build a community” (Smith et al., 2013: 135), forming one of the most important elements in livestreaming (Hamilton et al., 2014), as “stream viewers are attracted to channels where they feel noticed, important, and influential” (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018: 59). Whilst this understanding of what drives viewership helps to analyse interactive relationships between streamers and viewers, I would argue that Hilvert-Bruce et al. neglect to consider a wider range of viewer preferences; those who ‘lurk’ or are do not engage in chat still contribute to streams through their regular viewership by being part of the audience. Although some viewers seek active engagement, others may prefer passive consumption or simply to watch the stream without direct interaction. Whilst Hilvert-Bruce et al. (2018) discuss viewer engagement, Taylor (2019) writes on why people start streaming on Twitch: building social connections, forming a creative outlet, aspirations to make streaming their career, and streaming forming part of their job already (such as professional gamers, who may be requested to livestream their gameplay) (70, 71). Streamers on Twitch grow their channels by narrating their gameplay and other content, speaking aloud “their thought processes as they interact with a system and makes external that which would normally only be ‘in their head’” which allows for streamers to showcase their personalities, as viewers see their enjoyment of the content they are engaging with, and often frustration at setbacks or errors (75). However, although Hilvert-Bruce et al. (2018) and Taylor (2019) describe how viewers and streamers engage on Twitch, there is a gap here in the literature regarding how

intimacy can be developed. Thus, this research offers new understandings of the ways in which streamers and viewers form intimate relationships on the platform, expanding ideas of the practices that build intimacy (Jamieson, 2011).

Hamilton et al. (2014) state that the “formation of participatory communities is at the core of the live streaming experience” (1323). Participatory communities on Twitch can be primarily understood as engaging in conversation with other users, but also includes moderation and encouraging participation (1315). Through regular engagement in the chat, users can become familiar with one another, identifying individuals by their username. These relationships can be advanced further by cross-platform communication, wherein users meet on platforms such as Discord, in channels built around the streamer. Such communication on Discord also can invoke co-presence through the intention to communicate with each other and the synchronous communication afforded by the platform. Preece (2004) argues that communities can be categorised from a few different angles. First, we can examine communities from their focus, which in this case would be both the streamer and the content that is being streamed (Preece, 2004: 147). In this way, individuals have grouped together because they are interested in both the streamer and the game being played, or music broadcast, or art being created. As the face of the stream, streamers can draw individuals to watch them and participate through their conversation, entertaining gameplay, creating opportunities for viewers to participate. Alternatively, communities can be analysed from the position of the role of technology, which for this research would be Twitch, the affordances it offers- the chat function, live broadcast, the ability to send emotes and subscribe (Preece, 2004: 147). Finally, combining these two approaches, communities can be understood as “a group of people with a common purpose whose interaction is mediated and supported by computer systems, and governed by formal and informal policies” (Preece, 2004: 147). This definition allows for Twitch communities across the platform to be understood as being impacted by not only the streamers and the viewers, but also the content that they stream and the technology that is used to achieve each broadcast. Overall, both the content, centring around interaction with the streamer, and the chat functions afforded by the platform, make Twitch an ideal platform to build relationships between content creators and viewers (Johnson and Woodcock, 2019: 341).

Parasocial behaviour refers to the relationship that consumers of media can develop with media personas, such as television stars. The persona described by Horton and Wohl (1956) is able to generate intimacy with a crowd of people they do not know personally. They become known by the crowd from their observation of the persona, learning their mannerisms and knowledge about them from their conversation, despite the communication only travelling in one direction. Such feelings of intimacy are further enhanced through the frequency of the occasions that the viewer watches the persona, in which the persona becomes a “regular and dependable event ... integrated into the routines of daily life” (Horton and Wohl, 1956: 216). For streamers, the parasocial nature of the relationship can be taken a step further, with the ability afforded by Twitch for two-way communication conversation between the streamer and the viewer. On Twitch, research from Leith (2021) which examined verbal indicators in Twitch chat messages for parasocial relationships, found that users do develop parasocial relationships with streamers, which is particularly enhanced by the length of the content (123). Unlike the standard television show or film length, Twitch streams can last for the entire working day, with many working up to twelve hours daily. Leith (2021) also argues that although parasocial relationships are apparent in streaming, due to the possibility of interaction between the streamer and a viewer, there remains the option

for this relationship to shift away from parasociality. However, the existence of this potential “may serve to only further foster the development” of parasocial relationships (124).

Whilst the research from Johnson and Woodcock (2019), Hilvert-Bruce et al. (2018), and Ruberg and Lark (2021) covers various forms of streamer-viewer interaction on Twitch, this thesis seeks to build upon understandings of the practices that build intimacy (Jamieson, 2011), in order to expand this work to encompass how such practices take shape on Twitch, a live, digital environment. This research relies on Jamieson’s (2011) definition of intimacy as “the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality” (1.1). Within a digital context, intimacy is mediated through the use of technology. Building “the quality of close connection between people” (Jamieson, 2011) on Twitch is typically achieved using the chat function, as well as live video responses from the streamer. Although Jamieson (2013) made efforts to consider how technology renders some practices for generating intimacy more feasible than others, this commentary has not been updated since, leaving a significant gap in the literature regarding how new technologies, such as livestreaming impact the development of intimacy. However, writing on the practices that build intimacy, Jamieson (2011) also notes how “each practice tends to produce intimacy but is not a sufficient condition” (2.2), and how “one practice of intimacy is sometimes able to stand in for others (2.7). This is particularly pertinent for this research as streamers and viewers communicate entirely online, forgoing in-person contact. As such, this thesis will demonstrate how practices unfold on Twitch, exploring how the absence of physical presence is compensated for by innovative forms of interaction and expression, ultimately shaping the development of intimacy between streamers and viewers on Twitch. In analysing the development of intimacy between streamers and their viewers, this thesis places a focus on self-disclosure (Altman and Taylor, 1973; Jamieson, 2011), including the sharing of personal information, particularly that which is “unique, central” and “vulnerable” (Derlega and Chaikin, 1977: 104), and providing support and care (Jamieson, 1998). As described by Jamieson (2011), “access to knowledge goes beyond mutual offering of information to taken for granted privileged access to news, being trusted with back-stage and secret information and a relationship-specific sense of uniquely knowing each other” (2.3). On Twitch, streamers and viewers can communicate using the chat function, and Persaud and Perks (2022) state how such self-disclosures can be “heightened by the liveness of the platform” which allow for it to feel “sincere without overshadowing the entertainment production of the stream” (481). Although on Twitch, users are typically known by their usernames, which are often not connected in any way to their offline identities, Lomanowska and Guitton (2016) argue that this can nonetheless benefit the development of intimacy. Through anonymity, individuals may feel more able to share personal information, participating in self-disclosure, whilst also overcoming obstacles to disclosure offline, such as marginalised characteristic and physical appearance, that may deter them from sharing publicly (Lomanowska and Guitton, 2016: 140). This is evidenced further through the work of Henderson and Gilding (2004) who found that self-disclosure levels rise when there is a lower probability of in-person interactions. It is also important to note that Twitch users cannot be understood as truly anonymous, because of an “accretion of personal histories in their interactions” (Donath, 1999: 53). Instead, most Twitch users can be considered pseudonymous, as they may be recognisable by username and have a background and personal information known by others but not necessarily connected directly to their offline identity. While existing research has primarily focused on practical and in-person acts of care (Jamieson, 1998), emerging studies highlight how “online contact can facilitate sense of connectedness and support” (Juvonen et al., 2021: 1786). On Twitch, research from de Wit et al. (2020), found that Twitch viewers feel supported through watching and engaging with streams, particularly

through self-disclosure, alongside support from the community. Findings from de Wit et al. (2020) also indicate that, although viewers may find it easier to receive support in smaller communities, they tend to “stay with the streamers that they were already watching”, highlighting a preference towards the streamers with whom they had a more familiar relationship (13). Overall, research on the provision of care and support within the relationships between Twitch streamers and viewers is limited, and thus my research aims to fill this gap by exploring the dynamics of care and support exchanged between Twitch streamers and their audiences, shedding light on how these practices build intimacy.

Twitch streamers interact with their viewers from all over the world, developing relationships with viewers that they have never, and likely will never, meet in person. In this context, it's crucial to explore how digital spaces have transformed the way intimacy can be created by being together virtually. Although “intimacy is usually assumed to require physical proximity” (Valentine, 2006: 367), other research demonstrates how “the internet offers a way to be separate and together” (Valentine, 2006: 387. See also McKenna et al., 2002). This research will build upon the concept of ‘co-presence’, in order to examine how streamers experience intimacy with their viewers, despite physical distance. Zhao and Elesh (2008) describe the difference between co-location and co-presence. Whilst people can be considered “co-located if they are in each other’s proximity” (569), co-presence “involves the demarcation of different regions for different types of activity” (565), which would include online spaces that are characterised by “accessibility and responsiveness” (572) with “individuals ... willing and able to communicate and cooperate with each other” (Mowshowitz, 2002: 126). For co-presence to be achieved, technology supports rather than replaces human connection, allowing for intimacy to be built beyond physical boundaries (Kim et al., 2004: 329). On Twitch, co-presence “focuses on people’s perceived experiences, in terms of their perceptions or feelings that they are not alone in a virtual environment” (Diwanji et al., 2020: 2). Diwanji et al. (2020) also describe elements that contribute to co-presence on Twitch noting that viewers announced their arrival and departure, viewers indicated a sense of being part of a community, and exchange messages, often in one-to-one conversations, with the streamer directly responding to the viewer (8).

This section has outlined the literature that concerns building relationships on Twitch as well as the literature on personal relationships which this thesis aims to expand, bringing understandings to the practices that build intimacy on Twitch. Ultimately, this research will demonstrate how disclosure (Derlega and Chaikin, 1997), offering support and care (Jamieson, 1998), co-presence (Zhao and Elesh, 2008), and spending time together, granting privileged access (Jamieson, 2011) are involved in the development of intimacy on Twitch, and the challenges and complexities involved in building this intimacy. This contributes new insights into the dynamics of digital intimacy and community building within the literature and further expands on the works of Jamieson (2005, 2011, 2013) by examining how intimacy develops within a live streaming environment.

Boundaries

The following section examines literature on the role of boundaries in research on Twitch (Wohn, 2019; Persaud and Perks, 2022) and literature on personal relationships (Jamieson, 2005; Derlega and Chaikin, 1997) in order to draw parallels and build insights into the ways in which boundary management strategies translate to Twitch.

Writing on boundary work, Barth (2000) warns against understanding boundaries as “barriers”, as it negates the flexibility and boundary breaking behaviours that lead to “leakages”. Barth (2000) notes two possibilities for the creation of “leakages”, citing “inventive behavioural responses to the imposition of boundaries and the effects of social positioning” (28). Through applying this understanding to Twitch, this thesis aims to illustrate the ways in which boundaries are formed, maintained, and challenged, forming an important element of the relationships between streamers and their viewers. Writing on the way boundary work has been discussed in the theorising of intimacy, Jamieson (2005) describes how “the boundary between ‘familial’ and ‘non-familial’ relationships is increasingly blurred as the constellations that people designated as ‘familial’ become increasingly diverse” (194). Whilst Jamieson provides crucial focus on the degree to which “living personal lives and ‘doing intimacy’ involves protective or exclusionary boundaries”, the conclusion that “self-disclosing intimacy is the most exclusive form of intimacy in terms of demanding privileged dyadic time” (202) is a claim which this research aims to call into question through an examination of the intimacy that develops in relationships between streamers and their viewers.

Liu and Wang (2018) discuss how individuals communicate online with people across social circles, from close relatives, friends, to acquaintances and strangers. From these “diverse social circles”, “individuals’ privacy boundaries become blurred, and they are vulnerable to potential privacy threats” (1005). Altman (1975) writes that “privacy is conceived of as an interpersonal boundary process by which a person or group regulates interaction with others. By altering the degree of openness of the self to others, a hypothetical personal boundary is more or less receptive to social interaction with others. Privacy is, therefore, a dynamic process involving selective control over a self-boundary, either by an individual or by a group” (6). Privacy can be of particular concern for streamers, as leaked information could result in physical threats and harassment to the streamers and also their families, (Wu and Gui, 2022: 13). Such a threat is described by Karhulahti (2016), who writes of the practice of ‘swatting’ on Twitch: the process of sending police to investigate an emergency at the streamer’s address, for which viewers are often able to watch unfold through the livestream. Such actions may constitute “inventive behavioural response” (Barth, 2000: 28) as viewers find creative approaches to breaking the boundaries set in place by the streamer. As a result, “creators must perform relational labour and manage relational boundaries as they attempt to strike a balance between closeness and distance with audiences,” (Glatt, 2023: 6).

Part of the boundary work of streamers involves managing ‘trolling’ behaviour, defined as a “specific type of malicious online behaviour, intended to aggravate, annoy or otherwise disrupt online interactions and communication” (Coles and West, 2016: 233). Taking this understanding of trolling further, Lumsden and Morgan (2017) build upon conceptions of “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu, 1990), describing how trolls use “silencing strategies” to “remove the individual from participation in (online) public space (such as on social media sites), or dissuade them from engaging in further public debate” (927). It is also important to note, the ways in which trolls often target those who “hyper-visibly disturb normative notions of gender presentation” (Persaud and Perks, 2022: 483), as well as due to their race: the “presence of blackness often sends shockwaves through the culture” (Chan and Gray, 2020: 359).

As I will discuss within the chapter on Boundaries (Chapter 6), participants’ understandings of trolling varied significantly, encompassing ‘annoying’ behaviour to genuine threats. With trolling encompassing a broad range of behaviours, the categorising of behaviour in this way

is subjective, and is often left to the discretion of the streamer or moderators. One concern linked to trolling is the prevalence of anonymous and pseudonymous accounts online. Through obscuring their identifiable characteristics, individuals communicating online can create identities separate from their offline selves, as well as the ability to leave the interaction with (Markham, 2004: 106). Through these interactions, individuals may feel able to “speak more freely without restraints brought about by social norms, mores, and conventions” (Markham, 2004: 102). In their discussion on Twitch, Seering et al. (2017) state that “anonymous and pseudonymous online communities are particularly challenging to regulate. Without any easy way to attribute user behavior to real-life identities, users can behave in virtually any way they like without fear of reprisal or loss of reputation ... These technological variations intersect with community needs and goals to construct norms” (111). However, Coles and West (2016) state that “online members do not treat each other as being anonymous even when posters’ real names and identities are unknown” (52) and that trolls are not viewed as anonymous individuals and instead could be identified if wished and are subject to being anthropomorphised (47). Therefore, the effect of anonymity or pseudonymity in encouraging negative online behaviour is still unclear.

For streamers, one way of protecting their boundaries can take the form of limiting self-disclosure, which is defined by Derlega and Chaikin (1997) as “what one person tells another about himself/herself” (103). This self-censorship, “the act of preventing oneself from speaking” (Das and Kramer, 2013: 120), which on social media, may manifest as users seeking to “maintain presentation of their self-images across multiple social contexts simultaneously” and being “unwilling to diverge from the community’s perceived social norms” (Das and Kramer, 2013: 120). Faulker and Melican (2007) write how individuals who post to the internet are “looking for some sort of recognition” (61) such as finding communities of people with similar interests. Streamers must also find a balance between “engaging with their audience about sensitive issues... without overshadowing the entertainment production of the stream” (Persaud and Perks, 2022: 481). However, their goals and their social positioning “give rise to subtle differences in how and how much they want to be seen and heard” (Faulker and Melican, 2007: 61). Self-censorship is significantly impacted by how creators know both their audience, but also the risks of the wider internet (Faulkner and Melican, 2007). Following this concept, small streamers with supportive communities may feel more comfortable sharing personal and identifiable information, but that this is likely curtailed by concerns around trolling and abuse, as described by Persaud and Perks (2022), on their research on drag artist streamers on Twitch: “It was uncommon for a drag streamer, especially those that didn’t have a particularly large audience to manage, to ignore a comment or question about queerness or queer identity. However, depending on the setting ... if the streamer and their moderators were dealing with a particularly lively chat, or if there was a sense that there were some users trolling the chat, they would be left unanswered” (481). Persaud and Perks (2022) illustrate how streamers must make decisions around disclosure based upon finding the balance between disclosure and connecting with their audience against keeping the stream entertaining and protecting themselves from trolling.

Throughout this research, the role of moderators is discussed, particularly in relation to maintaining the boundaries of the streamers. Twitch moderators, seen as “positive examples in the community” (Wohn, 2019: 11) are chosen by streamers to help them maintain the rules of their stream and to adhere to site terms of service. In their research examining the influence and power of moderators on Twitch, Seering et al. (2017) argue that moderators hold “authority and status within the community” (111) which allows for them to “have some

ability to shape the type of chat environment that they want, though they may still be vulnerable to persistent campaigns of targeted harassment ... Moderation can be viewed not only as a reaction to specific events but also a method for preventing the spread of unwanted behavior and development of undesirable norms for what conduct is acceptable” (124). Writing on the “complex politics” of moderation on Reddit, Squirrell (2019) argues, that moderators “enforce rules, delete spam and avert or close controversies; they must also maintain atmosphere and epistemic integrity, implementing design features available to them in a way that disciplines users without alienating them” (1923). Squirrell (2019) highlights the tensions that arise for volunteer moderators, given the multifaceted role they take on, in particular, noting how balancing these responsibilities is crucial for sustaining an engaged user base on Reddit. As moderators on Twitch have a green sword icon next to their usernames, indicating their status, Wohn (2019) argues that this can act as a deterrent for unwanted behaviour from other users when they see that a moderator is active. However, it presented a challenge for moderators who wished to communicate with other users, taking on the role of viewer, instead of moderator, as the moderation icon cannot be switched off, presenting a “problem [that] ties into the complex issue of multiple identities and self-presentation” (11).

The data presented in this thesis highlights the ways in which streamers build and maintain boundaries whilst striving to develop intimacy in the relationships with their viewers. By analysing the strategies streamers employ to safeguard their well-being and that of their communities, this project contributes to the existing literature by shedding light on the overlooked aspect of affective labour undertaken as a responsibility towards protecting viewers.

Authenticity

There is now a growing body of literature on authenticity and Twitch (Tran, 2022; Consalvo et al., 2020; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019a) as well as authenticity across social media (Hall, 2015; Gilpin et al., 2010); this includes other video content platforms such as YouTube (Raun, 2018). This research applies knowledge from this literature to demonstrate the value of authenticity in streaming, its limitations, and the challenges which come with portraying authenticity online, with particular attention given to the ways in which authenticity intersects with gender and labour.

In their discussion on art streamers on Twitch, with a focus on their labour, Phelps and Consalvo (2020) state: “All of these various forms of labor are enmeshed and intertwined in a complex ecosystem” which directs streamers “towards a new idealism of authenticity” (2684). Whilst Phelps and Consalvo (2020) emphasise the value of authenticity, Ruberg et al. (2019) argue in their work on Reddit discussions about Twitch that there is, “in addition to economies of money and attention ... an imagined economy of authenticity. On Twitch, one’s value is also measured in fungible units of realness” (478). Through these analyses, it becomes evident that authenticity plays a pivotal role in shaping interactions and perceptions on Twitch, whether as an ideal to strive for in labour practices or as a commodity valued within the community.

The exploration of gendered dynamics within the realm of digital labour, particularly in the context of livestreaming platforms like Twitch, has become increasingly pertinent. Dargonaki (2018) underscores this significance by highlighting “the construction of a branded gendered

personality” on such platforms, emphasising the interplay between “contradictory” elements (106). Lark (2022) also details the complexities inherent in streaming through an exploration of the intricate relationship among gender, labour, and authenticity on Twitch: “tension between artifice and authenticity is extremely gendered, not only because women might be expected to manage the construction of the stream space for themselves or their children, but also because streaming requires the performance of feminized intimacy and affective labor by all participants regardless of gender” (468). Lark (2022) describes the “conscious tension about the authenticity and stamina” in streaming, with attention given to gender and domestic labour: “we are looking at these women looking out and being looked at and the mess outside the gaze of the computer’s camera is imagined not to exist in the eyes of the person on the other side of the screen” (463). Lark (2022) highlights the complex negotiations and expectations placed upon female streamers in managing their online personas, including streaming environment- tensions which reflect broader societal norms and expectations regarding gender roles (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

For streamers looking to earn money through their labour on Twitch, this can add a further layer of complication around their perception as authentic. As Woodcock and Johnson (2019a) argue, “it is the presentation of authenticity and genuine opinions that streamers promise to their audiences, and numerous streamers (and also creators on YouTube) have found themselves having to negotiate challenging relationships between the financial and cultural requirements of their work, which do not necessarily align” (332). As a result, a “tension” between the “culture of gaming authenticity, and the culture of aspirational professionalisation” (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019a: 331) can arise, leaving Twitch streamers to risk invalidating their portrayal of authenticity by appearing profit-driven, or turning down potentially prosperous, and often hard to come by, sponsorships and financial opportunities, demonstrating the delicate balance streamers must strike between maintaining and risking compromising their authenticity and meeting the financial and aspirational demands of their labour.

Whilst being perceived as authentic can be viewed as a crucial component of becoming a financially successful streamer, and thus an important element in the relationships between streamers and their viewers, Karhulahti (2016) writes how viewers on Twitch wishing to access what they perceive to be true authenticity from streamers may resort to aggressive behaviour towards the streamers. Karhulahti builds upon two Goffmanian frames, the ‘interview frame’ or conversation, in which the broadcaster talks to the audience, responding to messages in the chat, and the ‘play frame’ in which the broadcaster focuses on the game or content they are engaging with. If being targeted with abuse, streamers may be forced to react ‘authentically’ in response to the situation. Karhulahti argues that such behaviour involves “disorienting the subsequent interview frame” (2), getting a glimpse at the ‘authentic’, “backstage”, off-camera life of a streamer. Concerns about abuse can also encourage streamers to have boundaries to protect themselves, which may intersect with authentic portrayals. Writing about feminism and Twitch, Cullen (2022) notes that “Hiding personal details and developing a streaming persona for protection were described as essential, even though these measures puts one at odds with the dictates of authenticity in streaming” (549), demonstrating the tensions that can arise between maintaining boundaries and appearing as authentic on Twitch.

A lack of consistency can also be viewed as a marker of inauthenticity as McRae (2017) writes on lifestyle bloggers and authenticity, stating that “content that does not fully align with previous representations of who she is and what she claims to value, this might be taken

as evidence that there is no substance or ‘authentic self’ behind her persona, and that the blogger simply adapts her identity to fit the exigencies of the moment” (14). This indicates how content creators are expected to follow a sustained practice of authenticity, that is also as cohesive as a brand in itself. For Twitch, this consistency can be seen clearly in the expectations around the games that streamers play, including becoming well-known on Twitch for playing one game, but then facing repercussions such as loss of viewers and viewer complaints when they play another game. This may result in streamers continuing to play the game they have developed an audience playing, even when they no longer wish to stream the game, including invoking ‘surface acting’ and ‘deep acting’ to generate a sense of enthusiasm, to ensure their audience continues to support their streams. This consistency can also apply to a streamer’s personality, with even “intimate expressions of emotions” adhering “to a distinguishable and consistent self-brand” (McRae, 2017: 20).

However, the live nature of streaming has also been cited as an important factor regarding authenticity on Twitch (Consalvo et al., 2020). Twitch’s popularity comes alongside a shift in content trends across social media and instead a move away from the “memorialising function of the digital trace” (Robards et al., 2018: 78). Apps such as Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube offered users the ability to have content viewed for only a few seconds and stories available for 24 hours, after which they vanished, providing a “temporal fastness and ephemerality” to the communication (Handyside and Ringrose, 2017: 347). On Twitch, the content being made is taking place live, with immediate responses from viewers, and synchronous communication between the streamer and chat. The inability to edit on Twitch, unlike other content creation platforms, and the “liveness and long-form nature of livestreams...present challenges to a sustained and consistent persona” (Jackson, 2020: 70) and thus may encourage greater authenticity on Twitch. Liveness contributes a greater degree of spontaneity, which reduces the ways in which streamer can fine-tune the entirety of the content so that individuals can present themselves in a way that is “uncontrived and natural-seeming, expressing themselves in spontaneous showings of feeling” (Dubrofsky and Wood, 2014: 282). Consalvo et al. (2020) argue, “this liveness - in tandem with the particularities of Twitch itself - generates authenticity” (1), as well as forming a key component in the development of co-presence (Zhao and Elesh, 2008).

This thesis aims to contribute to this growing body of literature concerning authenticity on digital platforms by identifying how the expectations placed upon streamers, particularly gendered expectations, limit their ability to establish real authenticity and intimacy through streaming. Through this exploration, new understandings can be drawn about the nuanced ways in which authenticity intersects with the labour of streamers, influencing not only their gender performance (Butler, 1990) but also the development of intimacy between streamers and viewers.

Conclusion

This literature review has presented the existing literature on livestreaming, online labour, intimacy and boundaries in relationships, and the pursuit and portrayal of authenticity. Throughout this chapter I have aimed to draw attention to the literature that has informed this thesis, in addition to noting where this thesis seeks to contribute; in particular, by examining the intersectional experiences of women and non-binary people on Twitch, and in doing so, contribute to the ongoing discussion of gender, labour, and digitally mediated relationships.

This literature review draws attention to several critical themes that shape the landscape of livestreaming and Twitch in today's context. The theme of gender underpins the entirety of the work of this thesis, with women and non-binary people facing specific challenges and biases in their labour on Twitch, whilst also navigating intersectional identities and experiences of marginalisation in the relationships they form with their viewers. This chapter also highlights the importance of understanding how marginalised identities impact digitally mediated experiences, and the digital culture which encourages harassment and abuse of streamers. Further, this chapter explores the relation between the key themes of labour, intimacy, and boundaries in the context of livestreaming, with streamers and viewers navigating complex relationships whilst undertaking affective and emotional labour. In particular, attention has been given to the challenges of creating and maintaining personal boundaries in a public space, in addition to the pressures of managing the emotional and interpersonal aspects of livestreaming, alongside messages from viewers in real-time. Authenticity has been a recurrent theme throughout literature on streaming, and social media more broadly, with viewers often seeking out streamers and creators who they perceive as genuine and relatable. Within this review, I have sought to draw focus to the ways in which authenticity is explored within the literature, in particular, the intersections with the themes of gender, labour, and within the context of personal relationships.

Overall, this literature review demonstrates that livestreaming and Twitch are rapidly evolving areas that require further research and analysis, including expanding the scope of research beyond computer technology to consider the broader implications of the relationship-building practices that take place on Twitch. Such research can offer crucial insight into the role that livestreaming plays in the development of relationships, shedding light on the dynamics of online communication, the evolution of digital intimacy, and the benefits and responsibilities that come with being part of these interactive digital communities.

Chapter 2: Methods

My Interest in this Topic

I first made a Twitch account in 2018 when I was working on my master's dissertation. I was looking to find something to watch in the background whilst I worked and thought I might find content on Twitch that would appeal. I found Twitch to be an engaging platform, full of interesting people who I could quite happily listen to for hours at a time. I consider myself a somewhat passive Twitch user: I rarely post in chat or engage with streamers as I am quite happy to just have the stream on as background noise. I tend to watch 'variety streamers' who play different games in every stream but have also become particularly fond of competitive chess streams, as I used to play chess when I was younger. For me, there is something very comforting about being greeted by the same person each day as they stream, much like having the same radio host each day when you wake up in the morning. A significant portion of this thesis has been written in the digital company of some wonderful streamers, providing daily motivation and inspiration for this research.

I arrived at researching Twitch streamers in a roundabout way. Initially researching webcam modelling, I hit a wall in terms of ethical recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly from observing discussions across social media about the changes to their work, and concerns around oversaturation of webcam sites, whilst also becoming fatigued with having to engage with the exploitation or empowerment dichotomy within sex work discourse over and over. Whilst avoiding these thorny issues, I began to read about the other main form of online live performance: streaming. Streaming and webcamming share several similarities, and indeed much of the literature this thesis uses is borrowed from online sex work research, as key themes are shared across my previous research and my research on Twitch. Both types of work involve a person livestreaming a performance to an audience or 'chat' who can tip to show appreciation. Similar themes crop up in both bodies of literature regarding webcamming and streaming, for instance, building authenticity, monetising content, and online relationships.

When embarking on this research, I originally aimed to uncover the meaning of intimacy for participants within these digitally mediated relationships. Now I hope to demonstrate that this idea goes a lot further, by expanding the scope of this research to explore other processes that contribute to the relationships between streamers and their viewers, taking a holistic approach to their development and maintenance. In this thesis I discuss intimacy, boundaries, and authenticity alongside a wider context of labour and marginalised gender identities. I wholeheartedly enjoyed the opportunity to engage with streamers and learn more about their craft. I found their work ethic and ambition to be impressive and each of my participants to be articulate, holding profound understandings of the world around them. I hope that this thesis does justice to their insight.

Research Questions

My research questions were designed to question the work and behaviour of streamers, principally, their relationships with their viewers:

1. What role does gender play in the experiences of women and non-binary streamers in building relationships on Twitch?
2. How does the labour of streamers interact with the relationships they form with viewers?
3. How is intimacy established through streaming?
4. How are boundaries enacted and maintained in streaming?
5. How are concepts of authenticity produced and circulated within streaming?

RQ1 was designed to allow for an exploration of the impact of gender in the relationships between streamers and their viewers, and to understand how gender underpins interactions on the platform. This question takes account of the literature on online abusive behaviour, particularly towards gender-marginalised individuals (Massanari, 2017). This question was initially informed by lurking on Twitch and witnessing changes in behaviour towards individuals of different genders on the platform. Through exploring the gendered experiences on Twitch, this question seeks to understand how gender impacts the relationships that develop on Twitch and the ways in which streamers are able to interact with their viewers.

RQ2 invokes the literature on aspirational labour (Duffy (2017), affective labour (Hardt and Negri, 2004), alongside Marxist-feminist understandings of the macro-level influences (Cruz, 2018) to explore how the labour of streamers impacts the ways in which relationships develop with their viewers. This question seeks to discover how the labour of streamers interplays with the ways in which they interact with their audience and how they view the relationships that form on Twitch.

RQ3 and RQ4 build upon the work on personal relationships (Jamieson, 2005, 2011; Derlega and Chaikin, 1977; Zhao and Elesh, 2008) and boundary-setting behavior (Altman, 1975). Through these questions, this research seeks to understand how intimacy and boundaries, respectively, are developed on the platform, exploring how these factors impact the relationships streamers form with their viewers. This includes the examination of abusive behaviour on Twitch (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017).

RQ5 seeks to expand the current literature on authenticity, particularly on social media, by exploring the expectations around being perceived as authentic, and the limitations on such portrayals (Kondakci et al., 2022), with focused analysis given to where this theme intersects with the relationships between streamers and their audience.

These research questions were developed to explore the experiences of streamers on Twitch, examining their relationships with their viewers, the technology that they use, and their labour on the platform. In order to achieve this goal, I set out to ask questions that covered topics that emerged within the literature and thus were guided by the underlying assumption that relationships, alongside, intimacy, boundaries, and authenticity can be developed through digital communication (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Ruberg and Lark, 2021; Shields Dobson et al., 2018). I designed these questions to be focused on the discovery of themes around these topics (Agee, 2009: 434), using open-ended questions informed by the literature, as well as those noted from lurking on Twitch, to encourage detailed, descriptive responses from participants about their own understandings of relationships on Twitch.

The framing of these questions called for an inductive approach to the work and influenced the research decisions. Although I held ideas of the direction that the research was likely to take due to my role as a viewer on Twitch, I remained open to new ideas, themes and patterns

that arose from the data throughout the process. Further, examination of these questions informed the utilisation of semi-structured interviews and observation in conjunction with Marxist feminist and intersectional frameworks and approaches, which I will discuss in greater depth in the next section.

Research Approach and Framework

In order to answer the research questions, I chose a qualitative approach which encourages rich, descriptive data, allowing me to find themes and patterns across the responses. In this research, I worked to centre the experiences of the participants by allowing for flexibility through semi-structured interviews, encouraging the participants to bring up points they feel are important, and asking for frequent feedback to ensure they are happy with their representation within my work. Through this adaptive, participant-centred approach, I was able to follow new lines of inquiry which allowed for themes to arise that I had not considered. It also gave me the opportunity to evaluate the significance I placed on other themes, and participants were encouraged to voice their own views instead of a narrative being imposed upon them. As a result of this approach, the “emphasis shifts to their experience... rather than extracting a product from them” (Potts et al., 2022: 2538). Part of this approach involved understanding interviewing as emotionally more like a “communion rather than a conquest” (Ezzy, 2010: 168) which values the “interdependence of the researcher and the researched” (169). The result of such an approach works to ensure that the participant’s voice is the one being heard throughout this research through strategies of friendliness, mutual disclosure, and working together to build definitions and understandings (Douglas, 1985: 25). Similarly, when researching other women and non-binary people, “feminist women must deliberately and courageously integrate their repressed, unconscious female subjectivity, i.e., their own experience of oppression and discrimination, into the research process” (Mies, 1983: 121) as these experiences inevitably shape the research and its presentation. Therefore, I felt it was essential that “feminist values infuse and underpin every aspect of research” (Jenkins et al., 2019: 415). This research takes the view that “the emotions and experiences of the researcher can have a positive role to play in qualitative sensitive research and can provide valuable knowledge and worthy insight into a topic” (Johnson, 2009: 23) developed through “a process of self-reflection, knowledge and experience are embedded in the research process and are seen as essential to the interpretive process” (27). Taking a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews allowed me to address and include emotional responses within the data and note their relevance to the themes discussed. An in-depth analysis of the process of considering the emotions of the researcher is discussed further in this chapter.

I came into this research with the ideological parameters of intersectional, third-wave feminism (hooks, 1984; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Hill Collins, 2015) as it draws attention to the ways in which gender, race, class, and sexuality intersect to shape the experiences of individuals. This perspective aids me in exploring the complex and interconnected elements of identity and the subsequent inequality and power. Adopting an intersectional lens was particularly crucial for addressing RQ1 which examines the impact of gender and gender marginalisation on Twitch and includes discussions around intersectional harms faced by participants. Such influences can also be seen through the focus of this research which places attention on the experiences of gender-marginalised individuals, instead of those who oppress others online. There is only a limited quantity of research about gender marginalised individuals on Twitch and by researching their experiences, I aim to provide an opportunity

for people to have their experiences heard. Furthermore, through this research, I aim to challenge stereotypes and biases that exist for women and non-binary people online. However, I believe that future research could focus on those who marginalise others on Twitch and draw deeper understandings of why this behaviour takes place and ways to mitigate the harm.

Alongside taking an intersectional feminist approach, this research is influenced predominantly by feminist research methodologies, including Marxist feminist methodologies, in order to understand the macro forces and relations that shape the labour and social relations of streamers. Utilisation of a Marxist feminist approach encourages this research to make “the connections between a whole range of troubling workplace practices and experiences” that take into account these macro-level influences (Cruz, 2018: 72). Through adopting this approach, this research is able to critically analyse processes of production, labour, and media, alongside the consideration of the ownership and control over such processes (Wittel, 2012). This forms a central concern for this research, in particular to answer RQ2, which examines aspects of labour, both paid and unpaid, and the social relations taking place on and around a platform worth over \$5 billion. Amazon's ownership of Twitch allows it to hold control over the terms of service, payment structures, and content policies, which impact the working conditions of streamers. As such, the company profits from the creative labour of streamers through advertisement revenue and subscriptions. Additionally, unpaid labour forms a significant part of the Twitch ecosystem, from unpaid streamers who are yet to achieve Affiliate or Partner, to the moderators whose unpaid labour keeps streams free from abusive language and spam. Thus, a Marxist feminist approach was appropriate to understand the ways participants were making sense of their labour on Twitch, allowing for attention to be drawn towards the exploitation that gender marginalised individuals face under capitalist systems, which aids in the addressing of RQ1.

Streaming falls within conceptions of “aspirational labour”, which Duffy (2017) describes as “a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of getting paid to do what you love” (1). Within this type of labour, the focus remains on working potential, instead of earnings in the present. This leaves opportunities such as channel monetisation, sponsorships, and other financial gain as an aim for the future, whilst streaming for little to no money in the present. A Marxist feminist approach also leans upon intersectional feminism in order to understand how “all social relations of capitalist society are organized on the basis of inequality of race, gender, class, sexuality, among others” (Mojab and Zia, 2019: 270). An intersectional approach calls for exploration of the inequalities and power structures involved in streaming and how marginalised identities face different experiences within this work. Attempting to separate these identities would be futile due to their interwoven nature, which form to create unique experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). A Marxist feminist approach that accounts for the importance of these social categories allows for this idea to be expanded to demonstrate how these categories are generated and exploited (Salem, 2016: 6).

Generally, this research rejects the positivist stance in which “researcher and participant are viewed as being entirely independent entities, with emphasis placed on the researcher studying the object (i.e., the social actor) without influencing it, or being influenced by it” (Johnson, 2009: 25). Instead, this project takes “emotions into account at the ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and practical levels” as “production of reliable knowledge does not rest on the exclusion of the emotional dimension of human existence” (Harris and Huntington, 2000: 133). This starting point informed the use of interviewing, specifically

semi-structured interviewing and heavily influenced the processes of data collection and analysis.

Sampling and Recruitment

All participants were recruited using Twitter. Having used Twitter for recruitment with my previous research on webcam modelling during my master's degree, I had reasoned that it was an ideal way of engaging with an online community. Many streamers use Twitter to advertise their streams and interact with their viewers making it an ideal place to find participants for this study. I posted a tweet about my research, stating that I was looking for women to take part in Zoom interviews. This tweet gained a surprising amount of traction after Scottish comedian and Twitch streamer, Limmy, retweeted it to his 557,000 followers. My tweet was seen by 135,500 people, and I completed my target of recruiting 25 participants within 48 hours.

Due to the success of this initial tweet, I decided to allow more people to participate. Furthermore, following interviewee feedback, my next tweet promoting the research included that I was looking for women *and* non-binary people. This was a difficult decision with this research and one that I am still not sure was the correct choice. I faced numerous messages and feedback from participants in the early stages of the research that non-binary people would share many of the same or similar experiences and that their insight could provide a new layer of understanding of the ways in which gender and identity impact experiences on the platform. 'Non-binary' refers to "a gender identity which falls outside of the gender binary, meaning an individual does not identify as strictly female or male" (Out and Equal). However, I was also very keen to avoid in any way implying that non-binary people are "woman-lite" (Hearne and Damji, 2020), as the inclusion of non-binary people alongside women can arguably be seen as re-placing them into the gender binary. Since I finished the data collection from this research, I have witnessed the debate on the inclusion of non-binary people alongside women taking place across social media and am aware that it is a particularly contentious issue. I made the decision regarding the participation of non-binary people based on being as inclusive as possible and open to developing this research in new directions. I also adapted the interview guide questions to ensure that the language used was appropriate for all participants. The non-binary participants for this research offered incredible insight into their experiences on Twitch and strongly identified with the themes, including facing transmisogyny and transphobia, in a way that many of the women in this research also shared. Thus, although this grouping is perhaps not a comfortable fit, I believe that the inclusion of non-binary people within this research provided greater depth to the data and conclusions regarding the ways in which gender identity influences experiences on the platform.

Following on from updating my tweet advertising my research, I received more positive responses and was able to arrange a total of 35 interviews. To increase the reach of this research, I also sent direct messages to potential participants on Twitter, particularly to ensure that I had greater diversity in terms of the types of content the streamer produces, as I was aware that there are different subcultures on Twitch that would likely result in different experiences on the platform. I was also keen to include more diversity in terms of race and gender identity.

After engaging with the streamers on Twitter, I would then send them a copy of the information sheet for this research, which outlines details of what the study is for and how the data will be used (see Appendix). At this point, I asked all potential participants to feel free to ask me questions, which a few participants did. Their questions involved issues such as diversity in this study, concerns around anonymity, and scheduling. I then organised interview times, allowing two hours per interview, although I did not expect to or end up needing that much time as all interviews were under 1.5 hours. Prior to each interview, I would send a reminder well in advance to ensure maximum likelihood of participation. Despite this, three participants did not return my messages before the interview, and one did not show up for the interview so the final number of completed interviews was 32.

The majority of participants for this research are individuals who approached me after viewing my tweet which advertised my research. As a population, streamers are relatively small in number, although this group has seen an exponential growth since the pandemic. Through the wide sharing of the tweet, I was able to reach streamers from predominantly the UK and the USA but also a few participants from Germany and Sweden, allowing me to gain a broader perspective of how women and non-binary individuals navigate streaming. However, the absence of representation from beyond the Global North overlooks the potential for gaining deeper insights into the experiences of streamers by including the diverse cultural experiences and challenges faced by those with different linguistic backgrounds and from other geopolitical locations. Furthermore, this approach is “likely to lead to a sample containing individuals who are more open, more patient and more interested in the topic than the general sample universe” (Robinson, 2014: 36). In the interviews, I was aware that many of the participants were passionate about discussing Twitch streaming, particularly in relation to their gender identity. Thus, through this voluntary approach, self-selection bias may have impacted the data (Costigan and Cox, 2001), with participants potentially having a higher level of interest in my topic compared to other streamers.

Further on in the process, I also messaged streamers on Twitter after finding their streams on Twitch. Twitch infrastructure allows searches by genre or ‘tags’ used by the streamers. This enabled me to find potential participants to contact, although the search function limited me to accounts that were online at that moment. I chose not to message streamers on Twitch directly for two reasons. The first is that my Twitch account is not linked to my offline identity in any way, and second, that I believed that reaching out via my Twitter profile would verify my identity to participants to a more satisfactory degree. My Twitter account has an established tweet history with connections to both my personal website and my University profile, providing a level of validation to my interview request. I also noted that many streamers have significantly less followers on Twitter than they do on Twitch meaning that they were likely to have less messages, thus my message regarding the interview was less likely to get lost in their inbox. Approaching streamers directly provided me with the opportunity to ensure greater diversity in terms of race, gender identity, and content provided, as I could use the tags on Twitch to find their streams. I felt that it was important to intentionally invite individuals from marginalised groups into the research as they are likely to have different experiences of streaming from those of white, cisgender people, who often become the face of streaming in terms of both popularity and visibility. Increasing the diversity of the sample allows for this research to contribute to the limited literature and data on how gender-marginalised individuals navigate Twitch. By directly approaching individuals I was able to include a broader range of participants, aiming to mitigate the bias that could arise from self-selection. This was particularly important in order to address RQ5, which aims to investigate the impact of gender on the relationships developed between

streamers and viewers. However, despite this intentional recruitment, there may still be under representation or inadequate representation of certain demographic groups, which presents another limitation on the generalisability of the findings of this research. Overall, despite the limitations outlined, I believe that the methods chosen were the best fit for my research. This approach fostered a high level of engagement, and I was able to reach a wide audience on Twitter through the sharing of my initial tweet, whilst proactively recruiting ensured greater diversity.

Data Collection

Lurking

The data for this research was first collected through observation or “*lurking*” (Joseph and Black: 2012: 491) on Twitch. Orton-Johnson (2007) describes lurking as an “accepted practice of spending time in an online space observing interaction patterns and reading postings. Lurkers are seldom active in discussion through choice and are participants through their passive attention rather than their active contribution” (6.1).

As a regular viewer on Twitch, lurking seemed like a natural way of building my knowledge of how Twitch worked and learning more about how streamers interact with their viewers, particularly expected behaviours, and etiquette (Tagarelli and Interdonato, 2014: 1). I would regularly log-in to Twitch and watch streams for approximately one hour. Where possible, I would also refer back to the saved video of the livestream (not all streamers have this option enabled for their channel) in order to find moments of user interaction that were particularly difficult to capture in my notes at that moment. Unlike my typical experiences of watching Twitch as a viewer, as a lurking researcher I kept detailed fieldnotes, noting interactions that related to my research questions and new terminology to be aware of. During this part of the research process, I not only developed a strong understanding of the ways in which Twitch users communicate and the language used, but also how site mechanics are used to enable communication between streamers and their viewers.

Through observation I was able to view the wider context around the behaviour of streamers and viewers and the “ongoing dynamic activity” (Mulhall, 2003: 308) of streams in progress—a process that is difficult to capture from only interviews, allowing me to “engage with interactions on social media within their emotional, multimedia, and community contexts” (Winter and Lavis, 2020: 56) so that “diverse forms of expression, such as capitalization, emojis, GIFs, memes” (57) are also included. Twitch is a publicly accessible platform, with all streamers producing content that can be viewed by anyone. Due to the structure of the platform, wherein anyone can open Twitch without an account and view streams, all observed streamers would hold the expectation that they would be viewed by anonymous individuals. As a result of this structure of public, ‘open’ engagement, informed consent was not a necessary component of this part of data collection.

These research observations were informal and unstructured in form (Norskov and Rask, 2011) as I did not predetermine exactly the data I planned to collect. This approach allowed me the flexibility to find points of interest without rigidly adhering to specific types of communication and technology interaction from Twitch users or to a schedule. Instead, I would click through suggested streams on Twitch, and select a livestream to watch. Once watching the stream, I would observe the behaviour of the streamer and note how they

communicated with their viewers, utilised technological aspects of the stream to build engagement, and how viewers and moderators participated in the chat. When lurking on Twitch, streamers would not be aware of my presence, although I would be counted amongst the total viewers. This also avoided any concerns of what is sometimes referred to as the ‘halo’ or Hawthorne effect (Parsons, 1974: 930), wherein participants’ behaviour is influenced by their awareness of the presence of the researcher.

After recruiting participants for this research, I then went to their Twitch profile to learn more about the content they produce, and if possible, watched one or more of their livestreams. Many streamers also allow viewers to catch-up on their past streams as a video-on-demand, which afforded me the opportunity to watch streams from participants whose schedules conflicted with my own. On Twitch, the chat for past streams shows as a replay from the stream, so messages appear in coordination with on-stream events, which allowed me to view the stream as it would have been seen live.

Participants

All participants for this research are individuals who stream on Twitch, with the exception of one of the participants who had recently quit. The participants stream a variety of content, from Fortnite gameplay to live music performance. I chose to include streamers of any level, as long as they stream regularly and so participants cover a range of Twitter followings, with some participants with less than 50 followers, with others having over 20,000. Within the group of participants, I aimed to ensure there is representation for those who have become a Twitch Partner (streamers who are able to fully monetise their channel and potentially earn a living from their streams), those who are Affiliate level (which represents the vast majority of streamers on Twitch), and streamers who are neither Affiliate nor Partner. As Twitch streamers with the Partner status tend to have significantly higher followings, I found that they were more difficult to reach and were often unable to schedule an interview time. This may be due to their work commitments and/or from their Twitter inbox receiving a high volume of messages. Thus, this research includes more streamers who have the Affiliate status or who have not yet reached that milestone, with only four participants having reached Partner status at the time of writing. Several participants had not yet reached Affiliate status which means they were not yet able to earn money from streaming. The interviewees, mainly from the UK and the USA, with some from Sweden and Germany, all fell within the age range of 18 to 40 years.

Name	Twitch Status	Followers	Gender Identity	Twitch Content
SaraBelle	Affiliate	150	Woman	Variety games
Erin (ebx_erin)	Affiliate	2,700	Woman	Music
Frazley	Affiliate	1,900	Woman	Variety games
Katt Kartel	Affiliate	2,500	Woman	Art
AudenCrossing	Affiliate	300	Woman	Variety games
Boopcreate	Affiliate	840	Woman	Variety games
Frankie (anonymous)	Affiliate	350	Woman	Variety games
AmbertotheCore	Affiliate	190	Woman	Variety games

Naliny	Affiliate	340	Woman	Variety games
Annie (anonymous)	Neither	105	Woman	Variety games
RGBabby	Neither	145	Woman	Variety games
Chambourine	Affiliate	180	Non-binary	Game casting ²
LeeshCapeesh	Partner	40,300	Woman	Variety games and Just Chatting
Jambo	Partner	16,400	Woman	Variety games
Alice	Neither	40	Woman	Variety games
Riley (anonymous)	Affiliate	260	Non-binary	Variety games, primarily World of Warcraft
Laura Cress	Affiliate	1,000	Woman	Variety games and podcasts
Aimee (anonymous)	Affiliate	100	Woman	Variety games, art
Jessica Price (TazzieBomb)	Affiliate	60	Woman	Just Chatting
KaiJayne	Affiliate	110	Non-binary	Variety games
UhhGabi	Affiliate	2,100	Non-binary	Minecraft and Genshin Impact
BonnieSansClyde	Affiliate	570	Woman	Variety games
Arthremis	Affiliate	1,900	Woman	Variety games, Just Chatting, podcasts
Radderss	Partner	29,000	Woman	Variety games
FunnyLilSpoonie	Affiliate	95	Woman	Variety games
Bex_bomb	Affiliate	3,300	Woman	Variety games
Julia (anonymous)	Affiliate	560	Woman	Variety games
Bella (anonymous)	Affiliate	465	Woman	Variety games
Ashewyn	Partner	10,300	Woman	Variety games
Remi (anonymous)	Affiliate	390	Non-binary	Variety games
Jessie	Affiliate	740	Woman	Call of Duty
Robin (anonymous)	Affiliate	285	Woman	Minecraft

All data regarding participants was correct at the time of writing (2022) and may not reflect the current Affiliate/Partner status, gender identity/pronouns, and content type.

² Live commentary on another player's gameplay.

About the Interviews

I conducted 32 interviews with streamers, taking place using Zoom, email, or using Twitter direct messages. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions to accommodate flexibility with the questions asked and the overall direction of the interview. With this flexibility, I hoped to encourage the participant to raise points that they feel are important to the research and for my role to be more of an active listener, asking “probing questions” when necessary as well as requesting further clarity on points made (Starks and Trinidad, 2007: 1375). As discussed earlier, follow-up conversations were conducted with all participants, and for many participants, I conducted these conversations multiple times throughout the process. The follow-ups were particularly more frequent at points in which participants felt they could offer clarity on an issue discussed during the first interviews or were initiated by me if they had posted on social media about a relevant issue. I messaged all participants at the end of the writing process with the option of a Zoom call to discuss findings, of which 20 participants responded, and one opted for a Zoom call.

To keep up with the excitement and interest in my research, I arranged the interviews to take place over the course of May and the first half of June 2021. I did not want to book interviews too far in advance as I wanted to ensure the best chances for all participants to still want to take part and remember that they had arranged to be interviewed. This meant that some days I had three interviews, each between 45 to 90 minutes, which started to take its toll on my wellbeing. By June, I was feeling exhausted, which took some of the enjoyment out of the process. I still was very happy with the progress of my research and the quality of the data, but found that the interviews, particularly when they covered topics such as stalking, abuse, transphobia, and gender-based violence, would leave me feeling depleted by the end of the day. In response to this, I made sure to have as much time as possible offline, and I gratefully discussed my experiences with my friends. I completed write-ups of my thoughts after particularly difficult interviews and to provide some sense of closure on the feelings that had arisen.

To ensure that I covered a broad range of themes in the interviews, I developed an interview guide. The interview guide was informed by my previous research on webcamming, particularly on the themes of intimacy, authenticity, and boundaries, and from the available literature on social media, and streaming, which informed the inclusion of questions on digital labour. It also ensured that there was a flow between questions and themes, meaning that each move to a new theme felt as natural and fluent as possible. Creating an interview guide also provided me with the opportunity to check my terminology around Twitch features, ensuring that I was up to date but also that the language I was using to refer to participants was as inclusive as possible. Overall, the interview guide served as a way of shaping the interview, however, I approached each interview with flexibility, adapting to ideas brought up by participants (Potts et al., 2022: 2538), and being willing to jump between themes when needed, forming a crucial part of my participant-centred approach.

Zoom Interviews

Zoom is a free-to-use video conferencing platform that allows for real-time communication through audio, video, and chat functions. I chose Zoom as the software to conduct these interviews as they took place one year into the COVID-19 pandemic when Zoom had become ubiquitous, dominating the field of video conferencing (Dooley, 2020). When used for

qualitative interviewing, research from Archibald et al. (2019) demonstrated that Zoom was preferred in comparison to phone or other video conferencing software due to being convenient, simple to use and free. I found Zoom to be easy to use and useful in organising meetings with participants. Each meeting was set up to be password-protected and with a ‘waiting room’ feature enabled, meaning that no one could join the Zoom call without me allowing them in. In addition, Zoom’s popularity meant that many of the participants were very familiar with the program and no participants discussed any obstacles to their use of the software. The Zoom interviews were recorded using the in-application recording feature, after gaining oral consent from participants to start recording (Gray et al., 2020: 1296). This feature records a combined video and audio file in addition to a separate audio file. All video files were deleted immediately. Using Zoom also allowed research participants to end the call at any moment, which Thunberg and Arnell (2021) argue allows for participants to hold greater agency over their interview process. This was particularly important given the potential for interviews to cover sensitive topics.

Email and Twitter Interviews

The email and Twitter interviews typically took place over the span of a few days. I noticed that many of the responses were briefer than they perhaps would have been in face-to-face conversations or via Zoom. However, the Twitter and email interviews allowed me to access participants and data that would have otherwise not been included. For example, one of the participants is non-verbal and thus would not be able to complete an interview over Zoom. Conducting an interview over email allowed for them to participate in a way that supported their needs. Twitter email interviews accounted for five of the interviews I conducted with streamers. Using Twitter direct messages and email allowed for both me and the participants to take time to consider our follow-up questions and answers respectively, and consequently, I received in-depth written responses that were extremely detailed and useful. The use of email and direct messages “eliminated the need for synchronous interview times” (Meho, 2006: 1288) and allows researchers to interview more than one participant at a time. This is because the initial questions can be sent to multiple participants at once, who can then respond when they have time, regardless of their time zone. However, this does mean that the response times from participants can be slow, taking several days or weeks to reply, which does delay the research process. Using email and Twitter direct messages reduced my ability to build a stronger connection to the participants as there is no form of physical interaction such as seeing facial expressions and body language, thus building rapport was significantly more challenging (Kivits, 2005). To try and overcome this, I made sure to be conversational through the messages, to frequently thank the participant for their responses as well as occasionally resorting to lighter questions. These questions deviated from my interview guide and would reference something that a participant had mentioned, such as their pets or children in order to maintain a friendly and less serious conversation.

Developing Rapport

I started each interview by outlining the terms of the research again to the participant, ensuring that they knew about why I was interested in the topic and exactly how their data would be used. I took care to explain anonymity and also informed participants that I would send them a copy of the thesis for their thoughts and feedback. My openness regarding the research provided a good starting point for building trust with each interviewee.

King and Horrocks (2010: 48) discuss how “building rapport with your participant is widely seen as a key ingredient in successful qualitative interviewing...Rapport is essentially about trust- enabling the participant to feel comfortable in opening up to you”. For this research, this process often involved finding mutual interests and personal information to build a connection (Stuhlmiller, 2001: 67). For example, in the interview with Katt Kartel, we discussed our passion for rescuing animals as I had recently adopted a dog. Through building rapport, I felt that participants were more inclined to open up and share their experiences and would also have trust in me to fairly represent their narratives. By sharing this information, I was also able to demonstrate to the participant that I had at least some personal understanding of their experiences. Although in retrospect, I can understand how this sharing was beneficial for the interviewing process, I had not planned to share any particular set of information and only did so in a natural way, as part of the conversation. The information I shared over all the interviews covered many areas relevant to interviewees’ experiences such as mental health, physical health, negative encounters online, and experiences of sexism and misogyny, but also included more conversational and friendly personal information. When appropriate in the interviews, the sharing of the information also allowed for me to portray my “‘being- in-the-world’”. This in turn enabled them to perceive our relationship as one of being-with and alleviated the difficulty of me being perceived as an outsider: as de-worlded” (Johnson, 2009: 32). Through these disclosures I felt that participants responded with openness, and I often noticed a shift in tone from participants from being much more guarded and closed off, to being increasingly informal and more relaxed.

Following the end of the interviews, many interviewees thanked me for listening to their experiences and detailed how it was validating to be heard and to talk about their experiences online. A significant number of interviewees also expressed interest in being kept up to date with the research and noted their excitement to read the final thesis, which I agreed to send to them.

A Challenging Interview

The biggest data collection challenge I encountered during this research was the interview conducted with Aimee³. They refused to continue our conversation regarding participating in the research over Twitter, stating they were about to delete their account that day. She insisted that we move to Discord which I do not usually use for work. I noted this behaviour as unusual but proceeded to discuss the interview on Discord. Aimee was the only participant who refused to communicate on either Twitter or email.

Due to this behaviour, I was anticipating that the interview might not go ahead, however it did. Aimee opted for a Zoom video, with my camera on but chose not to have her own camera on, which was a less common approach amongst participants but not unusual. Aimee seemed unwilling to answer questions in more than a couple of words, and I was confused as to why she had approached me to be interviewed. I could hear Aimee typing on her computer throughout the process, seemingly distracted, alongside long silences and at several points in the interview I started to wonder if Aimee was recording me. I raced through the interview with often responses of only a few words from Aimee and despite my attempts to encourage her to elaborate, she seemed very uninterested in my questions. However, after I asked a

³ This name is a pseudonym.

question about the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on her streams, Aimee then divulged that she had lost the majority of her followers after she had been accused of inappropriate behaviour- accusations that she vehemently denies. Following the end of the interview, I searched up Aimee's Twitch username and found a Twitter thread outlining the extent of the accusations against her. These accusations included consumption and promotion of material portraying drawn and written child pornography, harassing other users with sexual messages, and expressing desire to doxx individuals who challenged this behaviour. Finding out about these accusations made me reflect on my own responsibility towards people who allege to have been hurt by Aimee's alleged actions. I noted that the numerous mentions throughout the interview to these accusations served as an opportunity for Aimee to attempt to change the narrative on the situation, particularly as she opted not to be anonymous. I debated on whether to include this interview as part of this research but came to the compromise that it would be more appropriate to anonymise this individual, particularly for those affected by their behaviour.

Emotions, Emotion Work, and Embodied Research

Despite enjoying the opportunity to build genuine connections with interviewees and gaining a deep understanding of how they navigate a complex online world, I noticed that the interviews did start to affect my mental wellbeing. This was at least in part due to the intensity of the interview schedule, as I heavily prioritised fitting in streamers whenever possible, often very late at night, due to time zone differences. I was particularly focused on capitalising on the high level of interest my research generated from my widely viewed tweet and so had, on some days, multiple interviews taking place starting from early in the morning until late at night. When possible, I limited the number of interviews taking place each day, and avoided having multiple as I felt after each that I needed time to decompress, take notes of the experience, and to reflect on themes discussed.

I embarked on this research with the expectation that I would likely empathise with and identify with experiences shared by participants who faced misogyny, online abuse, and fears for offline safety. I would quite freely define myself as a sensitive person which I believe facilitates an ability to draw common ground and empathise with participants very quickly. Stuhlmiller (2001) argues that "To get the story, the researcher must conduct himself or herself in a way conducive to fostering disclosure from the narrator" (67). Through my sensitivity I find myself being able to connect well, particularly when I discuss experiences of gender-based oppression and violence and feel like I can share a sense of solidarity with people that encourages openness and dialogue.

When conducting this research, I was exceptionally aware of the role emotion work was playing in the interviews. Dickson-Swift et al. (2009) discuss the idea that emotion work is part of the qualitative research process arguing that this work "is central to research on sensitive topics as researchers often change the way they would normally act while engaged in research" (2009: 68). This emotion work involves 'emotion management' (Hochschild, 1983), which on a surface level involves managing outward-facing emotions such as voice and facial expressions whereas 'deep acting' refers to the internal work to alter thoughts and bodily processes (Hochschild, 1983). Thus, part of the emotional work of researchers involves "giving an outward bodily display that conflicts with their true feelings at the time" (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009: 68).

During this research, on a surface level, I made sure to adapt my facial expressions and body language to show a friendly and calm exterior, although the computer webcam limited the participants' view, except for my shoulders upwards. On the inside, I was making sure to take deep breaths, regulating my breathing, trying to manage my nerves and conceal them from the participants. I initially felt that this was important as part of my role as a researcher- I was very cautious of coming across as unqualified or taking on this research in the role of a fan. Initially, appearing as the "competent, detached researcher" (Fitzpatrick and Olson, 2015, 52) was my aim. My work over Twitter and email to convey this during recruitment- such as sending information sheets and details of the research, my connection to the University, and my matter-of-fact and extremely organised messaging perhaps clashed with my unassuming semi-structured style for interviews alongside my gender and age. Being twenty-five years old at the time of the interviews, I noticed that a majority of participants were close to me in age and seemed to relax once they realised that I was of a similar age to them. I was generally happy to shake off the image of reserved and distant academic in order to take on the position as more of a peer as I felt it allowed me to develop rapport quicker with many of the participants. As argued by Ezzy (2010), "The performance of the dispassionate researcher role tends to distance the research from the people he or she is researching" (169), making it more difficult to fully comprehend the narrative and experiences of participants. Thus, as I got further into the interview process and more comfortable interviewing, I began to invest less time in cultivating the image of the researcher I initially thought I should be and started to instead work with my own skill set.

Embodied research

Once we understand the role of emotion work in qualitative research, the embodied nature of the research follows as an important element to consider (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Merleau-Ponty (1962) argued that the body is constantly engaged in the world around it, being observed and interacted with, through which people interact with each other. In the role of researcher, the responses from participants and the interview process cannot become disembodied: "knowledge is not something objective and removed from our bodies, experiences and emotions but is created through our experiences of the world as a sensuous and affective activity" (Hubbard et al., 2001: 126). The embodied process through which this research was completed, and ultimately achieved, will have impacted the "framing of this research" as "embodied emotional orientations always and inevitably influence the research process" (Ezzy, 2010: 169).

Showing Emotion

During the interviews, even with my later-found approach of being more emotionally involved in the stories told by my participants, I still worked at ensuring that the level of emotion shown was appropriate and a little more reserved. There were two occasions in which I found the emotion was difficult to contain, resulting in me crying.

The first experience of this was with Katt Kartel, with whom I had worked to build trust and rapport from the very first communication, as discussed in the Ethics section. Katt Kartel had expressed reservations about taking part due to some hostile experiences she had faced online and so initially did not want her name, face, or any personal information to be included. I thoroughly discussed the research process with Katt, outlining exactly how the interview

would take place, and what data would be included. I also mentioned my own experiences of dealing with a similar concern, noting that due to this I would ensure that the interview and subsequent data would be handled with the utmost care. Katt thanked me for my in-depth answer, describing my response as “*thoughtful*” and agreed to participate.

Within research on topics such as gender-based violence, the divide between interviewer and participant can become blurred through their shared connection to the subject matter. This is best explained by Campbell (2001), who discussed interviewing rape survivors: “We were studying something from which we have no immunity. There is no line that separates us, the researchers, from them, the survivors. We knew we could be or could have been on the other side of the interview—telling a story of surviving rape, not listening to one. It became more and more difficult to ‘think’ about rape when the very things we were hearing and learning in our research project reminded us of our own vulnerabilities” (39). Campbell acknowledges the emotional involvement from researchers in researching such deeply sensitive topics. Such emotions and connection to the topic allows for a deeper understanding of the participant’s experiences and thus emphasises the importance of managing the discussion of such topics with sensitivity.

From my initial discussion with Katt Kartel, I was prepared for my interview to require more work managing my emotions than some of the other interviews. Indeed, the interview did cover many of the darker elements to being a woman online, but it was not until the final few minutes of the interview that I felt an overwhelming emotional response:

Katt Kartel: Like, I know that I've had a tough time, does that mean that every streamer has had the same thing? No, but it's definitely real. And it's happened. And that's my story. But it really means a lot to me that someone such as yourself would want to make sure that I'm okay. And that is something that's really never been introduced in my life. So, I'm really thankful for that. I would love to be able to read whatever you share.

Eva: Oh, now I'm really crying!

Katt Kartel: I'm trying not to get emotional too!

Eva: What you said, that really touched me. So, thank you for that.

Katt Kartel: I guess I just wanted to share how appreciative I am that you would even care.

Katt Kartel thanking me for listening to and validating her experiences made me feel very emotional- I was happy that she felt this way and had got so much enjoyment out of talking with her. Analysing this interview later, I also noted on how I had described Katt’s comments as having “touched me”, which reflects on how there are physical elements to emotional feelings in qualitative research: “To say that we have been ‘touched’ ... is synonymous with saying that we have been emotionally affected” (Cataldi, 1993: 63). Through this process, in which my role aligned with that of a therapeutic mediator (Birch and Miller, 2000: 194), Katt was able to recount and reflect on difficult experiences, and from her responses, indicated a sense of connection as a result.

The other case in which I found myself crying during an interview was during a particularly emotional interview with Jambo. Jambo was describing what she referred to as the most difficult time in her life. She had broken up with her fiancé, lost her job, and ended up in the intensive care unit in hospital, with a subsequent \$3800 bill, all within the space of a few months. Having barely managed to stream during this time, she returned to give it one last shot. In response, her viewers rallied around her, allowing her to pay her bills and make it a full-time career:

Eva: I mean, it's just the most incredible story, from such a low point to getting all that support around you, it must have been just unbelievable.

Jambo: It's been... I'm gonna try not to cry and keep it professional.

Eva: I'm trying not to cry as well!

Seeing Jambo's emotion and her pride for her community was an incredibly emotional experience and I adapted my approach to ensure I was being accommodating and silent for the five minutes as Jambo described in detail how she felt, ensuring that I did not unintentionally interrupt her. I felt genuine sadness on hearing how difficult this time was for her but also happiness for how she received such overwhelming support when she needed it most. My tears signified that I as "the researcher had connected in a very personal and emotional way with the story that the participant was telling" (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009: 65).

Although I gave myself the space to feel and express emotions that arose during the interviews, I was always cautious never to let my own feelings take attention away from how the participant was feeling. I worked to keep my visible emotion more limited than perhaps it would be in other circumstances and made sure I was able to actively listen to the thoughts of the participant.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this project was granted by the School of Social and Political Sciences Ethics committee at the University of Edinburgh and the research was cleared at a Level 2 prior to commencement. Thus, all matters related to ethics on this project were satisfied and considered before beginning data collection. For this research I created detailed information sheets (see Appendix) which I sent to those interested in participating in this research. This information sheet provided knowledge of who I was and included relevant information about the research, such as how the data will be used, thus increasing informed consent, and contributing to transparency to aid in the building of rapport. Prior to commencing the interviews, I was aware that some of the data was likely to include difficult subject matters such as gender-based violence, online abuse, and racism. As a feminist researcher, I felt the ethical obligations towards my participants, namely, a "a caring responsibility to treat participants empathetically" (Kingston, 2020: 535) as well as acknowledging the need for participants to hold agency over decision making around the sharing experiences (Potts et al., 2022: 2535). Given the potential for the interviews to cover such sensitive topics, I was particularly clear on the issue of anonymity with respondents. I did not require participants to be anonymous for this research project as in early discussions I found that they were very

keen to discuss their experiences on Twitch, using either their real name or their streamer name, for instance:

Jessica Price: I think it's important for people to know that there are real people behind this stuff ... I am more than happy to give you my real name. People need to read the names.

Jessica mentions how by providing her real name to her responses, people reading her account may have greater awareness that she is a real human being with feelings, thoughts, and experiences. Jessica felt so strongly about this issue that she chose for her full name to be included, not her Twitch username, which is not connected to her offline identity.

As a researcher, my primary concern was for the wellbeing of participants and thus I had conversations with each participant about anonymity and what that would mean for them. If participants discussed any issues that they or I felt could impact their safety, have adverse effects on their wellbeing, or would have legal implications, I outlined these concerns to participants and so the option of anonymity could be “negotiated, not imposed” (Kelly, 2009: 442). For such situations, anonymity would play a significant role in shielding participants from being identifiable and ensured a safe and ethically sound research process. Such actions were not necessary for any of the interviews, except for the aforementioned interview with Aimee. For this interview, due to the nature of my concerns around forming a platform for which I felt that Aimee was seeking to clear her name, I chose to make her account anonymous and did not initiate further contact with her.

Prior to commencing the interview, I once again reiterated information about the research, including how the data will be used. For the Zoom interviews instead of using consent forms, I opted instead to obtain oral consent from participants. This was achieved by reiterating the terms of this research and for participants to explicitly consent to each term. With email participants, I also refrained from sending an attached consent form and instead outlined each of the points from the consent form and for participants to agree with each. I found that this approach reduced the sending back-and-forth of paperwork which increased the likelihood of a participant not responding and overall, this streamlined the process.

Following the end of each interview, I again discussed how the data would be used and had a conversation with each participant about their choice to be anonymous or not. Similarly to Jessica, many participants felt passionately that they wanted their name to be connected to their thoughts and experiences, particularly when discussing policy changes for Twitch. Of the 32 participants, only 7 initially chose to be kept anonymous. I informed each participant of their ability to change their mind later in the process, as I would be following up with them once the research started to take shape. This follow-up took the form of direct messages on Twitter and emails to those not on Twitter, with the option of a further conversation on Zoom. Out of the participants, 20 confirmed that they were satisfied with the research and 13 did not respond. From these follow-up conversations, one participant chose to become anonymous and did not cite a reason, and another participant, Katt Kartel, chose not to be anonymous:

Katt Kartel: I've thought about it for a long time, too, and even if I had never heard from you again, I did think, damn, that could have been an opportunity to look at what you put out into the world so people can learn more and humanise these people - because they are actually a person. It's someone who you can go look up, it's

someone you can go find, it's someone that's being open and forward. And I don't really want the men that have done this to me and other streamers and other women, I don't want them to feel like every time people are going to be scared to talk about it... It is scary, but I'm in a better place now, and if I'm gonna say it, then I'll say it with my whole chest.

Over the two years since I had interviewed Katt Kartel, she had been thinking over her choice to be anonymous for this research. As discussed earlier in this chapter, at the time of the interview, Katt had been nervous about taking part, due to having recently faced abusive experiences. The follow-up conversation with Katt allowed her to change her mind about being anonymous and having discussed the findings of this research with her, she felt able to put her name to her experiences. My conversations with Katt formed part of my participant-centred approach and demonstrated to me the importance of engaging in dialogue with participants throughout the research process, as participants' relationship to the research can be complex and change over time. Thus, for participants, "anonymity has the potential to contradict the importance in feminist research of women owning their own narrative and telling their story while asserting their own identity" (Gordon, 2019: 551). As such, the ability to put their names to their accounts became an important component of participants' engagement in the research.

All the interview data and audio recordings have been stored in a password protected online drive on the university server and all participants that requested anonymity were anonymised in the documents, transcripts, and files that have been kept. This anonymisation process involved removing any personal information that participants did not consent to sharing from the transcripts and withholding information that has specific or unique aspects of the streams that could potentially indicate the identity of a participant, such as specific location information.

Regarding lurking and observation, all the data that I collected was freely available online and did not require me to communicate with the streamers in any way. I also did not need to have a Twitch account in order to lurk nor did I have to contribute to the stream in any way, including financially. The data I collected from lurking did not include any personal data, including the names or other identifiable information of the streamers that I observed.

Although I did not anticipate any participant to be in emotional or psychological distress during the interviews, I was prepared with a list of resources and contacts who address gender-based violence and online violence and would have stopped the interview if I felt that this was the case. This was not necessary in any of the interviews.

Analysis and Coding

Before commencing analysis, I listened to each interview again to refamiliarise myself before beginning the long process of verbatim transcribing. Transcribing each interview meant that I became more aware of themes cropping up across the interviews and that I was able to notice patterns in behaviour and experiences from participants. Coding for this research began using the questions from the interview guide, and research questions, using the themes of labour, intimacy, boundaries, authenticity, and crucially, gender which had been developed through lurking on Twitch. This was achieved using NVivo, and subsequent codes were added based upon the themes that were noted from the interviews and from additional observation. Thus,

my research questions continued to “evolve through the coding process” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 12) as themes developed.

Following the completion of coding the transcripts, I ensured that I regularly reread the transcripts to examine how different themes connected as well as the wider context for different sets of experiences. Using NVivo, the data was organised into the aforementioned themes which I colour coded to “enable the visual identification of repetitions” (Riger and Rannveig, 2016: 34). These themes were then “organized hierarchically with higher order themes and subthemes” (35). For example, under the theme intimacy, there were sub-codes such as community, friendship, closeness, and romantic relationships. These subcodes allowed for me to find new themes within the research, and notice similarities between the responses from participants, such as discussions around mental health, which was not a theme I had anticipated prior to starting the research. The creation of the subcodes was guided by the feminist influences and frameworks adopted by this research in order to explore the impact of gender in the experiences of participants, and also included race and sexuality and the ways in which they intersect (Crenshaw, 1991). Moreover, a Marxist-feminist approach was beneficial for the examination of the interplay between these characteristics and to assess the context for this data under capitalist systems (Mojab and Zia, 2019: 270).

Throughout the coding process I continued to revisit the audio files as they provided me with tone and feeling behind the words, which was particularly important when looking at more emotional topics that emerged. The data collected for this thesis was analysed thematically, “discovering, interpreting and reporting patterns and clusters of meaning within the data” (Spencer et al., 2014: 27). This involved a “process of abstraction and interpretation, teasing out and creating more analytic concepts and themes, interrogating them for patterns of meaning.” (37). Throughout the analysis process, I aimed to develop a “rich thematic description” of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 11), drawing awareness to a diverse set of themes, and noting the participants’ experiences and “the factors and circumstances that shape and influence them” (Lewis et al., 2014: 438). Overall, the thematic analysis process aimed to draw attention to both overarching themes and to nuanced details within the data, building a more comprehensive account of the experiences of participants.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the approaches, methods, and processes that were utilised to construct and conduct this research whilst offering insights into the decisions made, and their impact on the research design. Following a discussion of my interest in this topic, this chapter then outlines the influences, frameworks, and approaches adopted in this project. This research was strongly influenced by intersectional, third-wave feminism (hooks, 1984; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Hill Collins, 2015) in order to explore the effects of gender, race, and sexuality, which impact the experiences of participants. Furthermore, this thesis also works within the parameters of Marxist feminism, to draw attention to the labour of streamers and the conditions they operate under on Twitch that influence the relationships they form with viewers. This chapter then outlines the sampling and recruitment approaches, discussing the use of social media to recruit, including the limitations of a self-selecting approach. A crucial discussion in this chapter centres around the processes of emotions, emotion work, and embodied research that took place during this project. This discussion offers reflections on my work to build connections with participants, engage with their experiences authentically and with empathy, and acknowledges the ways in which I was affected by the research

process. Observation formed a critical part of the data collection for this research and this chapter outlined the ways in which this method helped to build my knowledge of the world of Twitch. This observation contributed to the creation of the interview guide and provided valuable context to the interviews. This chapter then discusses the use of semi-structured interviews with streamers, indicating the ways in which taking a participant-centred approach allowed for new themes to develop and to take this research in new directions. This research faced several ethical concerns, particularly around the ability of participants to waive anonymity, which was an option that the majority of participants took. Such considerations were guided by the feminist (Cruz, 2018) and participant-centred approaches (Potts et al., 2022: 2538) taken for this research, which place a focus on the agency of participants to hold control over their narratives. Finally, this chapter outlined the analysis and coding process, namely thematic analysis, to organise the data into overarching themes and sub-themes, to draw awareness to patterns that formed across the interviews. Overall, the methodological choices and approaches outlined in this chapter shape the analysis and insights offered in the following data chapters, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the relationships between streamers and their viewers.

Chapter 3: Gender and Gender Cultures on Twitch

Introduction

This chapter covers the gendered experiences of participants on Twitch, discussing the ways in which their gender identity has impacted their time on the platform. The prevailing culture on Twitch is dominated by white, cisgender men wherein gendered violence, amongst others, is regularly enacted/perpetuated against women and non-binary streamers. This culture is enforced on the platform by the policing of the presentation of streamers, particularly regarding gender and also through the expectations and standards placed upon women and non-binary streamers, often targeted at individuals who do not fit within the dominant culture. This was an area that most participants were very enthusiastic to discuss, sharing a wide variety of experiences candidly with me, for which I am very grateful. From the start, I was aware that this chapter was going to be incredibly complex. Between the 32 interviews completed for this research, a lot of ground was covered on this theme, and the responses consisted almost entirely of negative experiences, and I have aimed to fully encapsulate these within this chapter. What stood out from every single interview was that each participant had either personally experienced or been witness to unfair treatment of women and non-binary people at best, and abusive and violent behaviour at worst. Much of what was discussed in interviews concerned what was often considered the mundane and everyday misogynistic comments, gender identity invalidation, or simply being made to feel like they did not belong on Twitch. Generally, each derogatory comment, or experience of being treated poorly speaks to a wider culture on the platform. Some participants shared experiences they had whilst streaming on Twitch that wanted kept off the record due to potential risks; that data is therefore not featured in this chapter. I mention omitted data here to demonstrate that what many of my participants have faced goes beyond what I am able to capture or divulge within this chapter and extends deeply into their offline lives. The merging of the boundaries of their real and offline realities and their ongoing negative experiences shape all of their experiences on Twitch. These gendered experiences shape the ways in which women and non-binary streamers interact with their viewers and the relationships that are formed.

Culture

As a predominantly gaming-centred platform, Twitch contains much of the leftover “toxic technocultures” (Massanari, 2017) that permeate through online gaming networks. Such networks centre around “othering those perceived as outside its culture” creating spaces which feature “retrograde ideas of gender, sexual identity, sexuality, and race and push against issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and progressivism” (Massanari, 2017: 333). Although anyone can sign up for a Twitch account with only a limited set of technology required, there is a movement reinforced by users that aims to keep what they view as the status quo maintained and to push back against greater diversity on the platform. Twitch ultimately allows for the facilitation of abuse directed towards those who “threaten the platform’s dominant culture” (Thach et al., 2022: 5) of white, heterosexual, cisgender men through a lack of action against harmful behaviour. Much of the “toxic technocultures” (Massanari, 2017) formed from what was known as Gamergate, an “internet culture war” (Dewey, 2021), which rallied against inclusivity and diversity in games, driven by “men’s anxieties over losing ground in a once homogenous universe” (Gray et al., 2017: 2). Gamergate ultimately became a widespread campaign to abuse women, LGBTQIA+ people,

and people of colour- groups who were not traditionally considered part of the games industry- to exclude them from gaming spaces, or to harass them to the extent that they left of their own accord. Although the Gamergate movement was seen as being most prominent between 2014 and 2015, its legacy still lives on in gaming spaces, including Twitch.

Whilst I was in the process of writing this chapter, one of the participants, Chambourine, tweeted about a recent experience they had faced when they and their friend received bigoted harassment whilst playing Valorant. In a follow-up interview achieved through Twitter direct messages, they told me they believe it linked to the toxic culture in gaming:

Chambourine: My friend has a feminine username and also had a rainbow flag equipped to the character they were playing. After a bad result, our teammates started picking on her for it, speculating her gender and mentioning her genitals repeatedly. She doesn't use her mic online because it makes things worse. So, I told them to stop to which I then became the target- the slurs started against both of us. They used pretty much every homophobic one possible even the N-word for some reason was on there. Finally, before I muted them, they threatened both of us with pretty specific sexual violence and that was the point we had enough.

When I asked Chambourine about why people feel able to speak to them using such violent and gendered language, Chambourine, noted the lack of accountability for individuals who send abusive messages, and discusses how anonymity is not a necessarily a motivating factor:

Chambourine: I'm pretty sure it's the lack of consequences. The worst thing they'll ever get for it is an account ban and then they can just make a new account. There's no other context in the world where you can openly act that way to someone without either people witnessing it or there being bigger consequences. I would have said it's because they are anonymous but some of the time, they have their full name online so it's not that for the most part.

Chambourine and their friend's experience exemplifies some of the worst elements of toxic gaming culture, demonstrating how violent remarks are normalised as part of playing video games online. Although most people go by usernames that are connected to their real name, Chambourine mentions how some of these individuals use their full name, which highlights how they feel there is no need to hide behind anonymous or pseudonymous accounts, and that the things they are saying are normal and accepted. This is further reinforced by the fact that this behaviour often goes unchallenged, and those who do challenge it face further abuse. Whilst there is little accountability for those who send abusive comments to women and non-binary people, Arthremis notes that Twitch has taken action to support the men on the platform by banning the use of certain insults that are almost entirely used against men:

Arthremis: Every time you go to the front page of Twitch, there's a carousel of rules of streamers that they are promoting, and it's just white man, white man, white man, white man, white woman, white man, and there's no variation, there's barely any women on there, there doesn't really seem to be any representation for, you know, people that aren't just cis women, and there doesn't really seem to be much diversity when it comes to race either ... because a lot of the biggest Partner streamers are male, a lot of stuff is catered towards them, especially when it comes to moderation. A little while ago, Twitch announced that new terms that were banned, and using them could get you banned. And those terms were 'simp' and 'virgin' ... But what wasn't

banned was any slurs to do with transgender people, or 'whore' or 'slut' or any of these things. So, any term that could offend a man was immediately blocked with a ban attached to it but there was nothing that was actually used to offend women blocked.

Arthremis' responses echoes the research from Zolides (2021), who describes Twitch as a "highly masculine space" that "privileges masculine forms of self-performance". As a result, Arthremis argues that men on the platform have greater influence over decisions that are made on the platform, such as by banning these terms which are often directed at men, albeit mostly used by other men. Twitch's statement from the Chief Operations Officer states that "making any derogatory statements about another person's perceived sexual practices and that does include negatively targeting another person with sexually focused terms. So, using terms like 'simp'⁴, 'incel'⁵, and 'virgin' as an insult to negatively refer to another person's sexual activity is not allowed under this new policy" (Twitch, 2020). However, Arthremis notes that these are terms that are typically applied to men, whereas insults that are often used against women and transgender people remain accepted on the platform. Thus, Twitch uses "community guidelines and other moderation policies in a way that implicitly reinforces dominant gender ideologies" (Zolides, 2021: 3013), by neglecting to act upon the language used to target women and non-binary streamers.

Whilst Arthremis notes the dominance of white men on the Twitch homepage and their influence over site policies, Bex_Bomb, who works in the games industry outside of her Twitch channel, has found that although she grew up playing video games, she has noticed that women are not able to take part without facing additional scrutiny and questioning over their very presence on Twitch:

Bex_Bomb: I've come to realise that women do have it quite hard. When I was growing up playing games and things like that, it was completely normal to me, and my parents bought me my console and my family would buy me games for birthdays and Christmases. It was never a big deal wasn't until I started being more involved with the games industry and getting on social media and eventually Twitch and stuff that ... It's really disheartening seeing women being brought down for just their existence ... I think men are hardwired to not accept them and to feel that they have a claim to gaming on Twitch.

Bex_Bomb came into the gaming industry after having grown up playing games without ever considering if she belonged. However, after joining social media and Twitch, she realised that women online are repeatedly discouraged and even violently targeted to leave gaming to the men. She notes that "*men are hardwired not to accept*" women on the platform, (the use of "*hardwired*" I take as strongly held beliefs aligned with cultural and societal constructs, rather than a biological disposition), which highlights the cultural norms which go

⁴ 'Simp' is an internet term to describe someone who is very affectionate towards another individual. The term was originally used to insult any man giving significant attention towards a woman in an attempt to have sex with them however, the term has now widened to be used against any man being polite and respectful towards a woman. Although the term is sometimes used to mock women, overwhelmingly the term is used to insult men.

⁵ 'Incel' refers to a man who is involuntarily celibate. Incels are seen as being aggressive and resentful towards those who are sexually active, particularly women.

unchallenged by many male viewers on Twitch and encourages them pushback against anyone outwith the cultural norms.

BonnieSansClyde also discusses the culture on Twitch and in gaming more generally, noting that for women who do find acceptance on the platform, there are even more expectations of the sort of games they should play:

BonnieSansClyde: I think it's because eSports has an entirely different culture where it is very masculine dominated, and stuff like that. Twitch streamers who are going for that, who are female or female presenting, it's very difficult for them versus, say you're a Stardew [Valley] or like Sims streamer, it's the opposite where it's mostly a feminine-based culture and if a more masculine guy tries to go into there, they're either called gay or insulted like, 'This is girly stuff, what are you doing over there?' So, it's difficult to play what you want because those cultures are just so split. And Twitch itself doesn't help because the chats are able to talk to you instantly and push you back to where they think you should be.

BonnieSansClyde references two games which are seen as acceptable for women to be seen playing which are *Stardew Valley* and *Sims*. Both these games fall into conceptions of 'cosy' or 'casual' gaming' in which the gameplay is often slower paced, there is less violence than in other games, and are non-competitive in nature. As a result, women on Twitch may find greater acceptance playing cosy games than they would with games such as *Call of Duty*, *Counter-Strike*, or *Valorant*. On the other hand, men on Twitch may face pushback from viewers for playing games associated more with women and receive homophobic and bigoted remarks for doing so. These divides within gaming culture are reinforced by the viewers on Twitch, who seek to ensure that those playing the games fit the stereotypical user. They are able to achieve this by messaging the streamer, questioning in real-time why they would be playing a game outwith the predetermined games associated with a gender, or use misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, and racist language to ensure that the streamer feels that they do not belong as part of the gaming community. Overall, this means that all streamers can be subjected to gender policing by viewers, in order to "ridicule an individual's gender performance to the point that they consider adjusting how their gender is performed" (Hatch and Randolph, 2021: 6).

In addition to pressures over game selection, women and non-binary streamers may find that they face more direct experiences that make them feel excluded on Twitch. Jambo discusses one occasion during which her male counterparts were intending to exploit her and other women on Twitch:

Jambo: There was an opportunity that I was offered early in my streaming career... and I was naïve, because I had just started, and it was a cool opportunity, only to find out that behind mine and two other women's backs, they were discussing how they wanted to market us, because we were attractive women, when they wanted to flaunt the women that they had involved to draw attention to their organisation. That's disgusting, isn't it? It was gross. We left- when the first [woman] left, they called her a whore. And then when we left, we were blocked and banned from everything. And they said horrible things about us ... It was a big learning experience for me, and it's made me extremely cautious about who I talk to and who I work with.

Jambo discusses this experience of being invited to join a streaming event but finding out that the men involved were not including them because of their skillset, their personalities, or their audience share but instead because they were women, whom they planned to objectify in order to promote their organisation. The misogynistic attitudes of the men involved was only further solidified by insulting the women once they had started to leave the event. As a result, an opportunity that could have been an opportunity to grow her channel early on in her streaming career was ruined. When discussing this, Jambo was very careful about the details she shared, as she did not want the individuals to be identifiable, even many months on from this experience.

Like Jambo, BoopCreate had an experience very early in her time on Twitch, which negatively impacted her time on the platform. As in Jambo's account, for BoopCreate what could have been a good opportunity for her channel was spoiled by misogynistic remarks:

BoopCreate: This is very early on streaming; I think it was like maybe I'd been streaming for like about a week or two. And I had been raided by another streamer... I was like, 'Oh my gosh, this is like a really big deal!', and I was really happy. At first people were normal but then after that, I started getting weird comments. I could tell people were trying to get around filters that I had put in the chat- just weird sexual comments. And I go, and I watch this guy's VOD⁶ from his stream and see how he ended this stream because a lot of times, you'll be like, 'We're gonna raid so-and-so, be sure to follow them, check them out'. But this guy had ended his stream by saying, 'We're gonna go raid this E-girl!' And I was very annoyed that he just made that assumption. I think it was probably because I was wearing my PJs that day. But I was like doing a pyjama stream and they were something a mom would wear for PJs. I just thought it'd be something fun and funny.

BoopCreate describes how she was doing a pyjama stream when she received this raid from another streamer, who had seen the still image of her stream and had made an assumption based on what she was wearing. Pyjama streams are a popular way of creating a cosy and friendly atmosphere, building intimacy with viewers through their access to seeing a more private side of the streamer. 'E-girl' refers to a "hypersexualized child aesthetic, which also borrows from anime" and is "an insult lobbed frequently on gaming sites, where any attractive or popular woman who games can be labelled an "e-girl" as a way of belittling her presence" (Jennings, 2019). By calling BoopCreate an E-girl before raiding her channel, this streamer referred to her in a demeaning way, setting the tone for his viewers who were joining BoopCreate's stream, and this behaviour meant that his viewers felt emboldened to harass BoopCreate, using creative spellings to send harmful messages, despite the filters she had in place. On Twitch, raids are meant to be a way of streamers showing support for one another by giving their viewers another stream to support and boosting the audience of a live stream. In some cases, getting a raid from a big streamer can significantly boost a smaller streamer's profile and assist them towards becoming an Affiliate or Partner. However, raids sent with malicious intent, known as 'hate raids' can send their viewers over to a streamer they want to mock or bully, , directing their audience, in some cases in the thousands, to what is often a much smaller and marginalised creator. For streamers, hate raids, "subvert their community sphere" (Cai et al., 2023: 8), damaging the relationships between streamers and viewers. From such negative experiences, streamers may start to view every raid with

⁶ VOD stands for Video on Demand and refers to a recorded livestream that some streamers enable to be watched after their stream has finished.

suspicion, which can result in “streaming became emotionally burdensome” and damaging for mental health (10). Hate raids are discussed in more detail in the Boundaries chapter (Chapter 6).

Furthermore, experiences like those of Jambo and BoopCreate show the extent to which women are sexualised without their consent, and insulted, whilst opportunities that should be positive are undermined through misogyny. This is evidenced in research by Anciones-Anguita and Checa-Romero (2024) who argue, “women are more intensely sexualized than men in a statistically significant manner and female streamers experience significantly higher levels of sexualization compared to their male counterparts” (10). During the process of writing this chapter, another high-profile controversy took place regarding the sexualisation of women on Twitch, sparking important conversations across social media on this topic. Streamer Atrioc, who has over 300,000 followers, was caught toggling his screen which revealed in his internet browser tabs that he had been watching deepfake⁷ pornography of female streamers such as Pokimane and Maya Higa. Such a high-profile scandal drew significant attention to the site, in effect, advertising it to people who would not have been aware of its existence. This controversy did make several of the women featured on the site aware of the content that had been made of them without their consent, who immediately started legal action against the site. However, the incident became indicative of the issues that many women face on the platform. Shortly after, Atrioc apologised, but by this point, many prominent male streamers had jumped to his defence, minimising his actions, or making light of it, and in some cases, mocking the women who were affected by this site. Overall, this incident demonstrated a key theme discussed throughout this chapter which is, regardless of how they behave or dress, women will be sexualised without their consent.

For women and non-binary streamers, their race can further impact their experiences on the platform, forming an inseparable part of their identity, and opening them up to increased expectations and abuse:

LeeshCapeesh: When it comes to me being a woman, at the end of the day, I'm a Black woman, so that in itself is like a whole other set of issues and discrimination that I have to go against. It's not just because you're a woman, nine times out of ten it's because you're Black and you're a Black woman. I'm never separated from my Blackness, it's just something that just goes hand in hand. I can't just be a woman, I'm always a Black woman. I'm a Black woman who streams on Twitch. I put myself out there to let the younger generation know, especially the younger Black women, that there are Black women in the industry and in the gaming industry that are doing a damn thing. And they're making waves for them. We're making waves for the next generation. I always try to be like a good representation for my daughter, she's a gamer, as it's just something that I didn't have growing up.

As described by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989):

“Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men...they experience double-discrimination-the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination

⁷ Deepfakes refer to manipulated video and audio material that is created using artificial intelligence. As such, deepfake pornography refers to artificial intelligence created pornography that is made in the likeness of somebody, typically a celebrity or public figure.

as Black women-not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women” (149).

This quote from Crenshaw emphasises how Black women face compounded experiences from being both a woman and Black- an idea which is further explored by Gray (2017), who describes how Black streamers on Twitch “act as agents of social change regardless of their intent. The mere presence of their marginalized bodies disrupts the norm of the space... They participate as social agents that engage in a dynamic and ongoing process of producing and reshaping the discourse about what it means to be a true gamer” (366). Thus, for LeeshCapeesh, her very existence on Twitch as a Black woman positions her as a contributor to the ongoing evolution of gaming culture and identity on the platform, as well as a target for those who wish to maintain the current culture on the platform. LeeshCapeesh also speaks of the importance of breaking down barriers and being a role model for the next generation, being inspired by her own daughter who is a passionate gamer and wants to be the representation for her that she did not have for herself. Overall, LeeshCapeesh’s comments provide valuable insight into the importance of greater presence for underrepresented groups but indicate that significantly more progress is needed regarding diversity and inclusivity on the platform.

Like LeeshCapeesh, Remi discusses how their race impacts their experiences on Twitch, noting that being Black results in people disregarding their creativity whilst facing loss of support from viewers whenever they talk about race:

Remi: When it comes to gameplay, women are not only expected to be skilled, but also funny, and fall under stereotypical and Eurocentric beauty standards. I’ve noticed that whilst guys can get by with humour alone, women are expected to do and be so, so much more ... There’s no winning and it sucks. I feel like as a whole in society, Black women and non-binary people have a harder time in terms of being taken seriously. We are often stripped from our right to be creative thinkers and visionaries. Often, we are overlooked because people do not wanna listen or understand the issues of what it’s like to be Black in a predominantly white place. They do not wanna take the time to adapt their environment nor acknowledge the fact that with whiteness comes anti-Blackness. I have noticed personally in my experience when I use my platform to speak on Black or POC issues, my following count drops down drastically ... People have a tough time stomaching Black issues when it comes from Black people.

Remi discusses the double standard that exists on Twitch, by which women and non-binary people are expected to be talented, beautiful- within Eurocentric beauty standards- and exhibit a sense of humour. Remi also emphasises the difficulties that come with being a Black non-binary streamer. Crucially, they have noticed that they lose followers whenever they discuss race, highlighting the environment in which viewers are unwilling to acknowledge and address the systemic anti-Blackness that permeates through the platform.

Whilst trans and non-binary streamers face clear scrutiny over their gender identities and the way they present, Aimee feels that trans streamers are also being pushed towards a particular streaming style, both in terms of the stream aesthetic but also in the ways they should behave on Twitch:

Aimee: Well, there’s a thing which is consistent across many platforms for trans people where the platforms are like ‘you can be trans, but you have to be trans quietly

in the way that we like' ... V-tubers are very common to see with trans women. And while I get that a lot of it is probably motivated by dysphoria, at the same time, it often ends up with a lot of it blurring together. And overall, a lot of trans women are expected to have the same very cute aesthetic. And I don't necessarily have a cute aesthetic ... Often you see there is a very concrete ideal in people's minds of, 'This is what women on Twitch do. This is what men on Twitch do'... There are similar problems with a lot of trans Twitch streamers, in my experience. Like, I'll watch a trans streamer and I just can't get into it because I feel like they're trying to fall into a category of, 'This is what a trans live streamer does'. And it's, okay, you use a V-tube and don't talk much ... For trans Twitch, I feel like there's this idea that you should be very calm and play very simple games, if you're playing a game at all. And they don't enjoy anything that's not wholesome, pure, cute, and sweet.

Aimee discusses how there can be a conditional acceptance of trans people on the platform, as long as they adhere to predetermined characteristics for their streams, one of which she mentions is not using a camera and instead using a V-Tube. V-tubes are 3D avatars that are made to represent the streamer, instead of them having their own face on their streams. Many V-tube character designs are heavily inspired by Japanese media such as anime and may also feature non-human design features. These avatars can be designed to follow along with the actions of the streamer, responding in real-time using motion capture software, according to each movement. As mentioned by Aimee, V-tubers are particularly popular with transgender streamers, and with streamers with other marginalised characteristics as using a V-tube allows for them to conceal their identity, or to present in a way that aligns closer to their gender identity, particularly when that may not feel as possible in 'real life'. As described by Chen and Hu (2024), V-tube characters "operate within a broader cultural and societal context that often reinforces gender stereotypes and norms" and thus the "construction of virtual femininity in partially embodied animated media involves a complex interplay between the empowering technologies of embodiment and the intricate gender scripts" (2). Furthermore, using a V-tube also adds an additional layer of safety for marginalised streamers, to protect them from abusive messages regarding their experience, whilst also keeping their true appearance hidden so that they can grow their channel without their image being publicly available and open to criticism. Aimee's response highlights the way that trans streamers feel they are expected to be hidden and quiet in order to be accepted on the platform. Being unapologetic about who they are, loud, and authentic is likely to result in significant pushback from transphobic viewers.

Alice discusses how she believes that if she were a male Twitch streamer, she would most likely still be streaming. However, due to the pressure and abuse she received as a woman, and the lack of representation on the platform, she felt so unsupported that she ultimately quit streaming:

Alice: I think that if I were the same person with the same personality and everything the same, but I'd just been a boy, I probably would still be streaming. But the harassment that I got, and the disrespect and just all the insults I think I wouldn't have gotten or maybe people would have defended me more. I don't think I would have had the same experience. I do also know that I probably would have had a harder time standing out, because when you're a girl on Twitch, you automatically stand out. Actually, after I ended my stream. I made a habit of scrolling through Twitch once a day and looking at people that were streaming and finding streams where like a girl streaming and just like trying to be nice and giving, giving the

support. I don't really know why I did it. I just felt like I had experienced bad stuff myself and I wanted to shield someone else from that. But when I scrolled, of course, it was kind of hard finding a girl, or someone that was obviously presenting as a female on Twitch. So, you do stand out. And I do believe that you have a lot of more people coming in just because you're a girl. They wouldn't come in to see a boy because there are boys everywhere on Twitch.

Although Alice notes that being a woman on the platform gave her a boost in terms of standing out amongst the millions of other channels on the platform, it comes coupled with greater harassment, which she argues she would not have received to the same degree if she were a man, denoting an even greater cost than the benefits it would provide.

This section has explored the ways in which viewers contribute to the enforcement and perpetuation of gender norms on Twitch, preserving what they perceive as the platform's status quo. Participants' responses shed light on the prevalent overrepresentation of white men on the platform, whilst simultaneously drawing attention to the scrutiny applied by viewers to every facet of women and non-binary streamers' presence - from game selection to clothing choices. This recurring theme of gender policing by viewers will remain a key focal point throughout the remainder of this chapter, exploring the gender dynamics at play on Twitch and the impact on women and non-binary streamers.

Hot Tub Streamers

At the time of conducting interviews for this research in 2021, the phenomenon of hot tub streamers was a controversial issue that was discussed frequently by participants most often without me asking a direct question about them. Most of these interviews took place prior to the changes made by Twitch to address the outcry and thus refers to the time before their updated policy was enacted. Whilst this research did not include any participants who are hot tub streamers, this section highlights the ways in which the presence of hot tub streams has influenced the broader Twitch community's norms and attitudes towards gender representation and content. Thus, analysing the reactions and discussions surrounding hot tub streams can provide insights into the perceptions of acceptable behaviour and content on the platform, and draw awareness to how gender stereotypes and expectations shape audience engagement and the streamer-viewer relationships.

Hot tub streamers, as described by Arthremis, are “*people sitting in hot tubs, sometimes looking vaguely sexual*”. She adds, “*But then again, the very idea of a woman on Twitch is sexual to some people and they're making money off it because people like to see a woman in a bikini chatting*”. The overwhelming majority of hot tub streamers are women; however, many male streamers took up hot tub streaming later, often as a joke or as a goal for reaching a certain number of subscribers or a streaming anniversary. Originally, hot tub streamers used the *Just Chatting* category, which was primarily used for conversations, instead of gameplay. During hot tub broadcasts, the streamers will chat and build connections with their audience, completing challenges all from the vicinity of their hot tub or pool.

When you open Twitch in your internet browser, the homepage features many of the most popular streams that are currently live. For a while throughout 2021, the homepage would feature countless hot tub streams. As a result, many people who were less acquainted with Twitch assumed it was similar to webcam modelling sites. This was something that I noticed, as whenever I opened the website, including when introducing people to my research, the

homepage would be dominated by women in hot tubs, usually wearing very little clothing, to which, people responded with confusion, ‘I thought you said this site was for gaming?’. AmberToTheCore also faced similar remarks when was starting her channel:

AmberToTheCore: When I said I was starting streaming, I mentioned it to my sister, and she was a bit shocked. She was like, ‘Are you doing it in a low-cut top?’ And I said no. And she said, ‘No, it’s for women who are, you know, scantily clad! It’s a way for men to perv on women’.

Twitch’s policy at the time was that “streamers may appear in swimwear in contextually appropriate situations” (Twitch, 2021) for which hot tubs, beaches, and swimming pools would all qualify. As such, some innovative creators set up hot tubs in their homes where they would stream live to viewers, whilst wearing swimwear, “*not really doing anything*”, according to RGBabby. However, she notes, “*A lot of people seem to like it, they’ll get thousands and thousands of viewers and then with that comes donations*”.

Many of the hot tub streamers also started to test the limits of Twitch’s policy, moving towards openly sexually suggestive content, which resulted in some high-profile account bans by Twitch. After much controversy, Twitch put out a statement clarifying “*while we have guidelines about sexually suggestive content, being found to be sexy by others is not against our rules, and Twitch will not take enforcement action against women, or anyone on our service, for their perceived attractiveness*” (Twitch, 2021). Twitch also reversed several of the aforementioned bans and created a separate category for hot tubs streamers, to keep the *Just Chatting* category fully clothed. At the time of writing⁸, the *Pools, Hot Tubs, and Beaches* category has over 630,000 followers and thousands of viewers at any given moment.

Despite Twitch’s statement, Bella felt that Twitch’s policies are not enforced fairly, with hot tub streamers being given significantly more leeway over their clothing, whilst those not in hot tubs face anxiety over their outfit choices in case they receive a ban:

Bella: Before I even started Twitch, I had heard horror stories of women getting their accounts locked because they showed ‘too much’ cleavage, when in my eyes they were really wearing quite reasonable clothes. The whole hot tub stream thing is really strange to me, because the rules of dress code apply differently to ‘normal’ streams, but if I were doing the exact same video game stream in a hot tub, for some reason the rules would be different. When the weather started getting warmer where I live, I started having a lot of anxiety about showing more skin on stream, both because I was worried about people coming to the stream to hit on me, but also because I was very scared of crossing whatever dress code line those other streamers crossed. I’m a fairly modest dresser anyway, but I felt very self-conscious about my chest, or the possibility of accidentally showing too much cleavage.

Bella sheds light on the anxieties around adhering to Twitch’s terms of service for streamers, particularly women. For Bella, hot tub streams provide a key example of Twitch being inconsistent with how they implement their policies (Thach et al., 2022). Bella’s concern about accidentally violating the policies identifies the intense scrutiny that women and non-binary streamers on Twitch face, requiring them to be continuously aware of their clothing

⁸ March 2023

and their appearance and self-censor, whilst they are sexualised - with or without their consent - by their audience and by site administrators.

The subject of hot tub streamers soon became a catalyst for conversations on how women on Twitch are treated, stereotypes about female streamers, and discussions on sex work, given the strong comparison to webcam modelling. Many of the concerns were regarding the age restrictions on Twitch, which only requires users to be 13 years old, and due the nature of some of the content, many were unsure of whether the platform would remain suitable for minors. Meanwhile, other streamers complained that hot tub streamers are taking away from their viewers, or, as described by Fandom.com (n.d.), “*The phenomenon of hot tub streamers has resulted in a considerable number of people whining about it*”. Erin and LeeshCapeesh both made their thoughts on male streamers who complain about hot tub streamers very clear, arguing that, under no circumstances are hot tub streamers to blame for male streamers not having many viewers:

LeeshCapeesh: The reason why they did what they did with the whole hot tub and pool thing is because a whole bunch of men are complaining ‘women streamers, blah, blah, blah, they’re stealing my views’. It’s like, ‘No, you have the personality of a piece of wet cardboard, and you have to reflect on the content that you’re putting out. The people who are going to watch these people, they’re not going to come and watch you because you don’t have what it is that they need’.

Erin: The whole thing happening right now with the hot tub streamers ... I’m on the side of it’s not against us, and they’re doing their thing, and they are happy. They’re not hurting anybody, their titties are not taken away from your game stream, sorry, buddy.

Whilst many streamers complained about hot tub streamers reducing their viewer count, Annie says it has not impacted her channel but argues that hot tub streamers may reinforce stereotypes about women on Twitch:

Annie: It obviously doesn’t affect me because I don’t use a face cam and I don’t play adult, porn games or anything. But it’s always been the joke about women streamers that they don’t do much, and they just don’t wear much. And I think for a while, that was probably true for like the top three women streamers, because they figured out how the system worked, and that they could get away with it. And it worked very well for them.

Annie’s response notes that there is a stereotype about female streamers in that they do not wear many clothes and instead of being talented at games, art, music, or other content creation, they rely on their physical appearance to get viewers. Annie believes that the rise of hot tub streamers has solidified this view, as many of the most successful women on Twitch were those doing hot tub streams. Such stereotypes shape the experiences of women on the platform and enforces expectations on how they should look and behave. Arthremis has been impacted by these stereotypes of women on Twitch, however for her channel, the comments attempt to compliment her by insulting hot tub streamers:

Arthremis: The only [comments] I have got are congratulating me for not being like other women because I sometimes wear a jumper when I’m cold. Viewers come in and say, ‘Oh, look! An actually dressed woman, congrats!’ ... All you’re doing is putting

down other women who are making far more money and getting way better viewership than me and they are literally doing what they're happy with. That's the one that's been happening a lot recently with hot tub streams. Some people are using that to go say, 'Those women are trash. I'm going to go watch a decent woman'.

Arthemis highlights the underlying misogyny and objectification that persists within the Twitch community. Arthemis indicates that viewers feel able to judge the appearance and clothing choices of women in order to grant them, or deny them approval, demonstrated by the viewers that congratulate Arthemis for dressing 'appropriately', rather than focusing on her actual content. Such objectification contributes towards the devaluation of women on Twitch and reinforces the inequalities that are faced by many women and non-binary streamers working to be taken seriously in the industry.

Alice also discusses hot tub streamers in depth, outlining the ways in which the growth of this form of content had impacted her, including how Twitch streaming as a woman has become a stigmatised role from its proximity to sex work, rising from the hot tub streamers. This resulted in less support from family and friends, as they question why she would want to start streaming:

Alice: Outside of Twitch there is a stigma- whenever I told friends or family members about streaming- I told my mom because I wanted her to support me, and she asked me if I was going to turn my camera on and I said I thought so. And she was like, 'Oh, well, I hope you're aware that there could be some guy on the other hand just whacking his thing to you!' And other people that I talked to were like, 'Oh so you're a camgirl now?' And I was like, 'I'm not! I just want to stream!' These remarks- they wouldn't have posted them if I wasn't a girl ... Even bigger female streamers, they always still get those comments asking if you are going to do a hot tub stream and stuff like that, and just not taking them seriously.

Alice describes her mother's response to her starting streaming, who expressed the fear and belief that men will sexualise Alice regardless of the nature of her online content. Moreover, Alice also highlights the negative stigma that surrounds women on Twitch due to their proximity to webcam modelling which is indicated from the disapproval and concern of family and friends. Goffman (1963) writes of a "courtesy stigma" which denotes the "tendency for a stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual" to those connected to them. For streamers, being associated with webcam models and other forms of sex work means that they may face 'whore stigma' (Pheterson, 1993). Through this stigma, streamers such as Alice are 'dishonoured' (Pheterson, 1993) and subjected to scrutiny and questioning, that Alice believes takes place only because she is a woman. Alice also argues that women are taken less seriously on the platform as viewers ask them if they are going to do a hot tub stream, instead of showing an interest in their content. This demonstrates that in many viewer's eyes, women on Twitch are there to be sexual objects, and they will continue to be objectified and sexualised without their consent, which hinders the opportunities for women to grow their channels based on their skilful content.

When Alice joined Twitch, she initially was streaming in the *Just Chatting* category until one of her friends warned her that the category had been taken over by hot tub streamers, and thus viewers had an expectation regarding the type of content, particularly when they saw a young woman streaming. During this time, Alice had also been receiving "nasty messages" which she then realised were because of her using the *Just Chatting* category, with viewers expecting her to be a hot tub streamer:

Alice: I don't care: sex work is work. Do what you gotta do. But it's very hard that whenever you're a female streamer, you get put into the box – you're just doing this to be like a hot tub stream. You're just doing this for attention from people, so they give you money? I don't know. I just hate when people see a phenomenon like that and they're like, 'Okay, so this is what girls do'. Not every girl does that but it's very hard to get past that.

In this second quote, Alice defends sex workers, indicating that she does believe that hot tub streamers are indeed sex workers, but stresses that she does not equate being a female streamer to sex work. In the category *Pools, Hot Tubs, and Beaches* 97.19% of the streamers are women, forming a “marginal niche” in which women can find success on the platform (Anciones-Anguita and Checa-Romero, 2024: 7), however “female streamers may resort to self-sexualization as a strategy to engage more followers” (8). As a result of the popularity of women in this category, women elsewhere on Twitch faced being grouped together with the streamers and stereotyped, which Alice resents.

Like Alice, AmberToTheCore is also concerned about the rise of hot tub streamers:

AmberToTheCore: When there's been a lot of stuff in the media about hot tub girls ... I mean, if they can make money off it, then fine. If that's what they want to do, then that's fine, I guess. But I think it does bring away what Twitch is about, which is community gaming at the heart of it. For a streamer like me who is just doing it because I like it - I'm not doing it for the subs or anything like that - I think when men are quite lewd, or they say anything inappropriate, it's met with a lot of apprehension. But if you're a type of streamer who is in the hot tub then it's a lot more welcome.

AmberToTheCore discusses the increasing prevalence of female streamers who use their sexuality to find success on Twitch, emphasising the importance of preserving the core values of Twitch as a gaming community whilst also recognizing the agency of other women on Twitch to choose their own path. AmberToTheCore acknowledges that while it is not necessarily problematic for women to choose to hot tub stream, she does believe that it detracts from the community gaming focus that Twitch was founded on. This viewpoint is reinforced by AmberToTheCore’s own background as someone who streams solely for enjoyment of gaming and socialising, instead of for financial gain, as she has a career outside of Twitch as a primary school teaching assistant. She describes the difficulty that comes with hot tub streams compared to her own content because, whilst men are strongly criticised or face consequences from moderators for making inappropriate comments on her channel, she believes hot tub streamers may be more accepting.

As discussed by AmberToTheCore, Laura Cress is also concerned about the comments from viewers, who often flood the chat with sexually charged messages, and this may be seen as acceptable in the streams of other women on Twitch:

Laura Cress: If Twitch allows it, and if they want to do it, then there's no problem with it. I mean, I personally would never do anything like that because the chat in those streams is disgusting. It's horrible, and almost fair play to those streamers for going wading through that swamp and getting the money out of it. It's just a horrible environment... I just think it creates this grotty part of Twitch, not because of them, but because of the people that are chatting and the things that they're saying.

The chat is the offensive part here... and it's quite a serious concern that it's going to leak out. I mean, it's bad enough that it's happening to this group of streamers already, but for it to be ubiquitous, it's quite a serious concern ... Obviously, it's not like Twitch is saying it's fine to talk like that. Those channels, they're still saying, 'you can't talk like that'. And the mods, those poor mods in their streams obviously will be banning people. But if that is the content, then that is what's going to happen. It's difficult, because I don't want to shame the streamers if that's what they want to do. But it's just unfortunate.

Laura Cress discusses the complexities concerning the chats in hot tub Twitch streams. Whilst expressing the view that such messages are not encouraged directly by the platform, and that streamers do have moderators to remove the worst of the comments, Laura argues that there is a degree of inevitability of such messages being posted in these streams which she worries will normalised and allowed them to proliferate beyond these streams. Laura describes the environment as "grotty," indicating her disapproval of the chat's content and the use of the term "swamp" reflects the quantity and content of the chat messages, which are typically filled with sexually charged messages and emojis, which Laura finds "offensive". Overall, Laura is hesitant to blame the hot tub streamers for the contents of their chat but believes that these messages are an unavoidable and unfortunate reality with their content.

Presentation

For women and non-binary people on Twitch, what they wear and what they look like form significant parts of their streaming experience. Due to the cultural expectations of what a streamer should look like and how they should behave, women and non-binary people find themselves under significant scrutiny for every aspect of their appearance, with many viewers feeling that they should comment and criticise at will:

Jessica Price: On Twitch, anybody could come across your stream, anybody has the potential to say something overtly negative about your appearance, or, in this case, literally, the gender that I identify with. If you're not pretty enough, if you're too pretty, if you look a little bit overweight in the way that you're captured in the camera ... And I know streamers who identify as men, who will literally show up to a stream in a t-shirt and shorts- I would never dream of doing that. In fact, on my stream yesterday, I was telling one of the viewers that I spent 20 minutes choosing my outfit, because, whether it's a pressure that we put on ourselves, it is a pressure that is there. And I think a lot of streamers, especially those who identify as women, will feel it.

Jessica mentions how when someone goes live on Twitch, their stream can be viewed by anyone who comes across it, not just people from their own community. This means that, unless their chat is limited to followers or subscribers only, people can immediately message their thoughts about how the streamer looks without having watched more than a few seconds of the stream. Despite there being no way to dress that would result in an absence of unkind remarks, Jessica describes how the scrutiny puts her under intense pressure regarding how she looks, including the clothes that she wears, in order to limit the criticism and unwanted commentary. This pressure often becomes an internalised and normalised part being on Twitch, as noted by AmberToTheCore and KaiJayne:

AmberToTheCore: Out of my friends, it's male streamers that make more money than the female streamers. If you're a girl and you're planning on making a lot of money, you'll do all the things that you need to do. So, you make sure you're dressed appropriately, which is nice, and you've got your make-up on.

KaiJayne: If I'm not really feeling like putting on makeup today or I don't really want to put on a nice shirt, I don't really want to dress up today, I've considered just being like, 'Oh, hey, guys, like no face cam today. It's just gonna be mic and some gameplay'. But I've realised, by not having my cam on, that I've lost viewers consistently. And it really makes me think, are they really here because of my stream or are they here to look at me?

These two quotes highlight the intensity of the physical expectations faced by women and non-binary streamers. AmberToTheCore's comment suggests that female streamers have to put in significant effort compared to their male counterparts to make money, making getting dressed and wearing make-up a necessity in order for success on the platform. KaiJayne highlights the pressure that they feel as a non-binary streamer to constantly present themselves attractively even when they do not feel like it, as not appearing on camera can lead to a loss of viewers which forces them to prioritise their physical appearance over their wellbeing and personal autonomy. Both AmberToTheCore and KaiJayne draw attention to the degree to which clothing and make-up forms part of the expectations of women and non-binary streamers, creating additional labour. Similarly, FunnyLilSpoonie, states, "*You can't really just hang out in like your loungewear, you are gonna have to really dress up and sometimes become an object for people*", which emphasises the degree to which many women and non-binary people on Twitch see the objectification and sexualisation of them as an inevitable part of streaming, and necessary to becoming successful on the platform. This forms part of the affective labour for streamers, as they navigate the expectation to curate their appearance to appeal to viewers while grappling with the broader implications of perpetuating harmful stereotypes and norms within the streaming community. Affective labour is discussed in greater depth in the chapter on Labour (Chapter 4). Such responses also demonstrate that although hot tub streamers may receive an amplified experience of scrutiny over their appearance and presentation, the dynamics of objectification persist across all content genres for women and non-binary streamers, as described by Zolides (2021): "Whether it turns out to be 'sexual content' or not is less powerful than the mere implication that women's bodies and how they are gazed upon are themselves a likely form of sexual content" (3011).

One issue that was raised by many of the participants is that they feel there are different standards on Twitch, particularly for cisgender, white men, compared to women. Ultimately, throughout the participants' experiences it became clear that there is no possible route to avoid criticism and abusive comments, regardless of how they choose to dress:

Laura Cress: I was doing a DJ stream, and I have a different camera that films the DJ decks as well as me- it's a side-on thing. And I just had someone come in and say, 'You should have bought a bra for this stream'. And I was wearing a jumper! I was like, 'Well, weird thing to say'. But I guess it was because you could see my chest as well as the DJ decks. I think I just banned them ... they didn't even say hello or anything like that. They literally just came in and said that and then didn't say anything else. So, they were clearly just coming in to cause trouble.

Laura Cress's experience provides an example of the body shaming that women face on a daily basis. Her stream was met with inappropriate comments about her clothing choices and her body was being sexualized without her consent, despite her stream being primarily focused on her music. Unwanted comments about their physical appearance from viewers can make streamers feel like they are under a microscope and contribute to an online culture wherein women are constantly judged and scrutinised based on their appearance, perpetuating sexism and misogyny on the platform. Moreover, the fact that the viewer was new to her stream and that their first message was to send a sexist and inappropriate comment shows their intentions were clearly to get attention and offend. As described by Gill (2007), "the body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgments of female attractiveness" (149). Applying Gill's work to Twitch, women on the platform, such as Laura Cress, are expected to self-monitor in accordance with expectations of viewers who impose a relentless scrutiny over their appearance. As such, women on Twitch must navigate a delicate balance between expressing themselves authentically and conforming to restrictive societal norms in an attempt to avoid harassment. Experiences such as those of Laura underscore the ongoing struggle for women to assert their presence in digital spaces without succumbing to the pressures of conforming to patriarchal expectations and ultimately reflect a broader issue on Twitch in which women's worth is often reduced to their physical appearance. For Alice, one viewer sending a sexist and unkind remark, sparked a conversation with other viewers, criticising her appearance:

Alice: I do remember one exchange where one of the guys was in chat complaining about the quality of my camera and then another guy got back and said, 'It's not really worth seeing anyway', and they were having a full-on conversation about how ugly I am ... People called me all the words: 'bitch', 'slut', 'whore', 'camera whore'. And there were a lot of specific insults to me being a girl on camera, like people calling me a camgirl or telling me to show my boobs.

The instances in the above response from Alice underscore the pervasive misogyny prevalent on Twitch. Alice recounts being subjected to severe harassment, with viewers criticising her appearance and engaging in derogatory conversations about her. The insults- such as labelling her a "bitch", "slut", and a "whore" reflect deeply ingrained misogynistic attitudes that target women based on their gender and appearance and reinforces the sexist culture on the platform (Kleinman et al., 2009: 48). This toxic environment is further exacerbated by the entitlement of viewers who feel justified in demeaning and objectifying female streamers, as shown by the demands for Alice to show her body and the use of terms like "camgirl" and referring to online sex workers. As a streamer with a small following and no moderators, Alice lacked the necessary support to navigate this hostile environment and experience significantly contributed to her decision to quit Twitch streaming in 2021.

Whilst many of the participants have faced unkind and unwanted comments about their appearance, several noted that there are different expectations for men on the platform. Here, Ashewyn, Radderss, and AudenCrossing express their frustration at the expectations they face as women on Twitch, as they feel men are under significantly less scrutiny:

AudenCrossing: Women are expected to fix how they look and look a certain way and be pretty to look at. Whereas men don't- sometimes they can look messy. I have to

look put together every time I stream, I can't be looking like a mess. They'd be like, 'Are you sick? What's going on?' Even when I was sick, I still had to look together... I think literally anything a girl does on Twitch can be open to criticism and judgement, and you can probably get shit for it. So, to a degree, you have to decide, 'What do I want to do? What do I want my stream to look like?' And I don't really care what other people have to say about it. Because you cannot please everybody, especially on the internet.

Ashewyn: There are less expectations of men in general. Do they use cam, do they not? How do they look? I don't think it has any importance to them at all. But when you're a woman on this platform, it always feels like question marks keep popping up ... You either have someone coming into your chat and being like, 'Oh, you're so sexy, show me your boobs?', 'Do you sell feet pictures?', 'Do you have Only Fans?' And I'm dressed completely conservatively, I have no reason to sort of attract these kinds of comments. And then at the same time, you'll get someone that comes in and starts shaming me for the way that I'm dressing and saying, 'Oh, I bet she's getting all the views because of her looks'. And some people want you to show more, some people want you to show less. It's always like, what do you want from us?

Radders: Men on the platform can get away with so much! They can get away with having a weird hair colour, they can get away with being overweight, they can get away with not being that funny and being quite stoic, and men could get away with having a complete persona that they put on, and it's funny. But then you get to women... a fat woman is just devastating to them - they just state fat women should not exist. And then you've just got women that are attractive, how dare they be attractive? Whether they're fat or thin, just don't be pretty. Oh, you know, 'Have you got boobs? How dare you! You're not cisgender? How dare you! You're not a real woman.' It just feels like there is no way for women to be accepted on the platform.

These quotes from AudenCrossing, Ashewyn, and Radders, collectively depict the double standards that are present on Twitch regarding physical appearance. Whilst men are able to stream successfully without using a camera, wearing any clothing they feel like and will likely face few negative comments from viewers because of this, women on Twitch are subjected to a high degree of scrutiny and objectification. AudenCrossing indicates that women are expected to present themselves perfectly, even when they are unwell, as showing this would lead to further questions and judgement as “no transgression is too small to be picked over” (Gill, 2007: 149), whilst men's appearance standards are seen as being relatively low. Subsequently, women face criticism and judgement merely for existing on the platform, leading to a greater anxiety and pressure over how they should present. Ashewyn's experience reflects this as she highlights the constant questioning that she receives when she streams, with viewers pressuring her to provide sexual content. She notes that dressing “conservatively” does little to stop such comments, highlighting how clothing does not determine whether or not women on Twitch will face inappropriate and abusive comments. Furthermore, Radders' response indicates that avoiding judgement as a woman on Twitch is impossible, as women can be ridiculed for being fat or for being thin, for being attractive, or in the viewer's opinion, less attractive, demonstrating that there is no approach that will allow her to avoid such comments. As a result, women's appearance often overshadows their content and contributions, leading to the devaluing of women's contributions on the platform. This is also exemplified in the literature with Ruvalcaba et al. (2018) analysing comments on

Twitch stating that, “37% of the positive comments toward women focused on appearance compared with 7.5% for men” (307).

Whilst many of the participants note the expectations on how women should dress on Twitch, Julia feels that women who choose to wear less clothing set a standard for women on Twitch that she does not want to follow:

Julia: The majority of successful females use their bodies for attention-grabbing. As a modest female, I barely see any growth, support, or new viewers because of my choices in presentation... [I receive] instant discrimination, especially by males. I have been fetishised, sexualised, and approached by multiple individuals for sexual favours, then slandered or cursed at when I did not comply. Even though I am a very modest, and family-oriented streamer, it seems inescapable.

Julia feels that her channel receives less attention because she dresses in a “modest” way, compared to other women on Twitch. Julia’s comments also contribute to a wider issue which reinforces the idea that for women to be successful they must dress in an “attention-grabbing” way when, as this chapter has discussed, there is intense pressure on women, as well as other gender-marginalised individuals, regarding the way that they dress. Julia’s response neglects to acknowledge how the dominant culture on Twitch and the subsequent behaviour of viewers are major contributing factors that propagate such discrimination and thus, blaming other women for pushing the viewers’ attention away from “modest” streamers is not the root cause of the problem. This is further evidenced by Julia mentioning that she also receives unwanted comments that sexualise her without her consent, no matter what she is wearing. As discussed earlier in the chapter, there is a “courtesy stigma” (Goffman, 1963) that accompanies some women on Twitch due to the proximity of sex work. A response to this stigma is to distance oneself from the stigmatised group (Goffman, 1963: 31) which in this case can be achieved through the othering of women who dress differently from Julia. In her distancing from the stigmatised group, Julia seeks to align with values she views as being good, being “modest” and “family-oriented” to reject the ‘whore stigma’ (Pheterson, 1996), whilst seeking to place blame on women for the actions of men on the platform.

Whilst cisgender women on Twitch face pressure regarding how they present themselves and behave on the platform, transgender women, and non-binary people face additional scrutiny over their gender identity, from blatant transphobia to perceptions of how a transgender or non-binary person ‘should’ look, according to their gender identity. This was discussed by Chambourine, who does not use a camera during their streams:

Eva: Do you ever feel that there’s any pressure to conform to some sort of physical appearance relating to your gender identity?

Chambourine: Yeah, definitely. Which is why I've not got a face cam and so none of my community know what I look like. You're actually the first person to see me ... No one really knows because I'm still trying to figure out how I want to present. Because at the same time, I want to present less masculine. But at the same time, I don't want to have to do that. It's such a weird slope to be on ... it's just a tricky situation ... For instance, do I wear more makeup, and wear more feminine stuff, just so that people start to question it so I can make them more comfortable with using they/them pronouns? Because they just default to he/him instantly ... Obviously then I don't

want people to misconstrue what non-binary means and think that it's a third gender and I don't want to fall into that stereotype of looking 'non-binary'.

Chambourine discusses how viewers, particularly those new to their channel may assume that they are a man, based on the pitch of their voice. As they do not use a camera on their face, this has provided Chambourine with time to consider how they want to present, which for them is a complicated issue. They highlight how they feel some degree of pressure to present in a more feminine way in order for people to realise that they are non-binary and to use their correct pronouns instead of defaulting to he/him pronouns (Lunceford, 2010: 64). However, by doing so, this solidifies the idea that being non-binary is a neatly packaged 'third gender' which can be understood as androgynous or gender-norm defying, which ignores how there is no set way of being non-binary, and that non-binary people cannot be identified and confined by expectations and gendered stereotypes. KaiJayne has faced similar experiences of being non-binary on Twitch and notes that *"it's more about presentation than anything else because I'm non-binary, and I feel like people go into my chats and like, see me and obviously, I'm very femme presenting. So, they'll assume my pronouns and assume my gender"*.

Like Chambourine and KaiJayne, Riley also discusses their experiences of being non-binary and the complexities of how to present on Twitch, highlighting the expectations they are under to appear androgynous:

Riley: In terms of even presentation of myself, I have to present a certain way that's expected because I'm non-binary. People have a view of what that looks like. It's supposed to be androgynous- they assume I'm going to walk around looking like a cross between David Bowie and Sinéad O'Connor. It's just that nonbinary is going against the gender norm. I wear what I want because I like it. But people assume that I'm probably going to walk around in a suit and tie and with a bow in my hair. Don't get me wrong, that was half the confusion I had when I was first trying to work things out. Because I do like dresses, and I do like pretty things ... There's no definition on clothes, they're just clothes ... but there is that expectation that you have to look a certain way, you have to behave a certain way.

Riley describes how they feel pressure to present in an androgynous way in order to conform to assumptions around what it is to be non-binary. They are sympathetic to this, as they note that they used to have similar assumptions at the start of their non-binary journey, leaning into dressing in an androgynous way. However, Riley felt that dressing the way that people would expect a non-binary person to dress was not authentic to who they are and draws attention to the fact that clothes can be, and should be genderless, and that being non-binary requires breaking out of the predetermined ideas of gender and presenting in a way that feels true to who they are. Writing on the complexities of choosing clothing as a non-binary person, Kilroy (2023) argues that "wearing clothes deemed 'gender neutral', or more masculine to mask femininity and vice versa, has turned into its own gender performance" and that "these restrictive ideas increase gender dysphoria, as it is unrealistic, and usually unattainable, for every non-binary person to emulate this assumed androgyny". Kilroy underscores the challenges in navigating gender identity and the detrimental impact of restrictive norms on individuals' mental well-being, as echoed by Chambourine and Riley.

Riley also discusses how being non-binary has not stopped them from receiving gender-based, abusive comments:

Riley: I have had people come into my chat and misgender me and tell me that I'm bad at a computer game, 'because I'm a woman'. That kind of stuff... The minute that you tell someone that you're non-binary, you're going to get one of two responses: 'that's okay, that's cool' or one that's absolutely negative. There's never an in between. People either respond warmly, or they can respond quite hostilely.

Riley's response demonstrates how they are affected by gender-based violence, particularly based upon the assumption that Riley is a woman. This highlights how being non-binary does not exempt an individual from receiving misogynistic abuse, which is often directed on how the person looks, and is guided by gendered and stereotypical assumptions based on appearance.

This section has outlined the intense pressure on women and non-binary streamers regarding their appearance, particularly in the clothing they wear and how it corresponds to their gender identity. Experiences like those of Chambourine, KaiJayne, and Riley emphasise how viewers' acceptance of transgender and non-binary streamers is often conditional on them conforming to strict and stereotypical ideas of gender- which undermines the very concept of being non-binary. Without conforming, transgender and non-binary streamers risk viewers not acknowledging or respecting their pronouns and gender identity or sending them abuse in order to police their gender performance. For transgender and non-binary participants, these expectations can be further amplified, as any deviation from rigid stereotypes can be seen as invalidating their gender identity, leading to further harassment from viewers.

Expectations and Standards

Another aspect in which women and non-binary people on Twitch find themselves facing greater scrutiny is regarding their personality. Many participants discussed the ways in which they felt that there were certain characteristics that they were supposed to adopt in order to be accepted and supported on the platform, whilst men do not face the same expectations:

Katt Kartel: [if men behaved the same way] I think that they'd get praised for it. I've seen it happen. They'd get praised for it, you know, a pat on the back, look at you go. But me, it's like, oh, she's feisty. Oh, she curses too much, that's not very ladylike.

Bella: I get the sense that women and feminine-presenting streamers are more successful if they are bubbly, happy, unfailingly welcoming, and 'sweet', whereas I think male-presenting people on the platform can succeed in a wide variety of dispositions.

Jambo: As far as women go on Twitch, you are expected to be nice, right? You are expected to not argue, not to fight back, not to be mean. Because the moment you do, you're labelled a bitch ... In gaming, you're just expected to take harassment, it's a part of the job and if you can't, then get off the internet, if you don't like it. All these bullshit sayings are just so that people can treat you however they want. It's asinine.

Katt Kartel discusses the double standards and gender biases that are present on Twitch, noting that if men were to exhibit the same behaviour as women streamers, they would be praised, whilst women are heavily criticised and judged. Katt mentions how viewers would criticise her behaviour for deviating from gender norms, which are reinforced by viewers

telling Katt that she is “*not very ladylike*”. Like Katt Kartel, Bella’s comment identifies the different standards on Twitch, noting that femininity and being very “*sweet*” is expected of female streamers, creating a very limiting character which they must adopt on the platform in order to be accepted. Jambo adds to the list of characteristics expected of women on Twitch, saying that they are expected to be “*nice, non-confrontational, and non-threatening*” to avoid being called a “*bitch*”. As described by Guarriello (2019), on Twitch there is an affective “*mandate of happiness on live streams demands that women simply shrug off sexist or problematic comments and spin it back to the game or their life*”, cited as a “*brutal requirements of neoliberal economies*” within streaming (1761). Thus, women and non-binary streamers face limits on the degree to which they can be authentic as they are expected to only respond with positivity, even in the face of abusive messages. Guarriello (2019) notes how this is linked to the “*neoliberal demands*” of Twitch (1759), in which streamers may feel pressure to behave according to what their viewers prefer and expect in order to find success on the platform. Furthermore, Felmler et al. (2020) describe how on social media “*harassers reinforce traditional stereotypes, consciously or not, by attempting to shame women with labels that counter these normative expectations*” (18). They argue that “*bitch*”, which they define as “*a malicious, spiteful, or overbearing woman*”, along with other abusive slurs, is used against women to enforce stereotypes of “*beauty as well as niceness, morality, and sexual inexperience*” (18), such as the expectations described by Katt Kartel and Bella.

Like Katt Kartel, Bella, and Jambo, AudenCrossing discusses the pressure to behave according to predetermined characteristics, particularly on days when she is not in the necessary frame of mind:

AudenCrossing: There’s a pressure as sometimes I’m not feeling up to being super talkative and social and basically performing because it is a performance to a certain degree and you’re trying to be entertaining. There are days where that seems so incredibly difficult, to get myself mentally in that state and be able to hold that for so long. But then you don’t want to let people down by either skipping your stream, or, if you seem like you’re not having a good time, then they’re definitely not gonna have a good time. And there’s a million other people on Twitch, who are just as cute as you and their stream is just as nice looking as yours, except they’re really excited to be there. So why would they not go and watch them? You have to bring it 100% every single stream until I guess you blow up... you have to always be very aware that you’re being constantly perceived, you’re being watched, you’re being judged, so you need to make it good.

AudenCrossing describes how she feels she must maintain her “*super talkative*” persona for her audience, noting that being entertaining in this way is a performance, and one that can be mentally exhausting to maintain for extended periods. The fact that AudenCrossing does not feel able to let this performance drop, even on days that she is not feeling well, demonstrates how women on Twitch are expected to conform to certain standards -being entertaining, personable, and attractive at all times- or risk losing viewers. AudenCrossing’s response also references the emotion and impression management (Hochschild, 1983; Leary and Kowalksi, 1990) that will be discussed further in the Labour and Authenticity chapters (Chapters 4 and 7), denoting the work that takes place both to adapt one’s emotions and outward display, but also taking actions to inspire a response from others- in this case, to fulfil expectations around personality, whilst being entertaining. AudenCrossing’s awareness of the performativity of her streams can be aided using the work of Butler (2006). According to Butler (2006), gender is not biological but instead consists of a repetition of behaviours to

represent prevailing gender norms (191). Through this lens, on Twitch we can see that this is further enhanced as streamers take on the role of hosts, repeating their behaviours to maintain a consistent image and persona (Dargonaki, 2018: 108). Therefore, for AudenCrossing, a tension can arise from the expectations upon her, which are developed through her consistently performed persona on the platform. When she does not feel mentally able to fulfil the requirements for her stream, she opts to skip it but notes the pressure that competition of countless other streamers provides.

Alongside the pressures regarding personality, women and non-binary streamers also are questioned repeatedly over their skill level, whenever they play games. Viewers often inundate their streams with criticism and unwanted advice, viewing the streamers as in need of their help:

Frankie: Definitely genders are treated differently. Men are treated as much more professional gamers, but women are always questioned. Like, I've played Dark Souls 3 recently, and a lot of my comments are like, 'Wow, this can't be your first run through the way you've definitely practised this' ... it kind of feels like you're negging me here and I hate it.

Bella: Something I continue to have some trouble with on Twitch is something that I deal with in normal society too, which is the tendency to assume women are less informed/less skilled and less knowledgeable. I almost always have a 'No Backseating' tag on my streams, but that often doesn't stop people - usually men - from coming to the stream to explain something to me, or just try to flex on me with their presumed superior knowledge of something.

As discussed in the section on Culture in this chapter, many women and non-binary streamers are expected to play 'cosy' and non-competitive games. Those who defy these expectations face increased levels of pushback from viewers, aiming to make them feel insecure about their gaming abilities and to undermine them. Frankie describes how on Twitch men are treated as professional gamers and are not made to prove their skills at every turn, whilst women are questioned and subjected to "negging"⁹. The disparity in the treatment can lead to women feeling insecure about their streams, greatly impacting their experiences on Twitch and can perpetuate stereotypes about women being less skilled and knowledgeable than their male counterparts (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018).

Bella further exemplifies this discrimination when she mentions the difficulty she faces in dealing with unwelcome comments from male viewers who believe that she requires their help. Despite having a "No Backseating" tag in her streams, which remind viewers not to tell her what to do or to explain game mechanics, many viewers still assume that she is less informed and attempt to flex their superiority by explaining things to her. Such behaviour reinforces the idea that men are the default experts, whilst women are presumed to be beginners, and draws attention to the privilege that many men on Twitch receive in gaming in that they do not have to defend their right to be taken seriously and respected within the gaming community (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018).

⁹ "Negging" refers to insulting or giving backhanded compliments to undermine someone's self-esteem, with the intention of manipulating them, usually for the purposes of romantic or sexual interest.

Another way in which women and non-binary people are impacted by expectations from viewers is regarding their relationship status, as RGBabby states, “*having a partner can be a deal breaker*”. Here, Naliny and AmberToTheCore discuss how concealing your relationship status has become necessary in order to find success- and maintain it- on Twitch:

Naliny: Pokimane has been in the news a lot lately. I think a big part of it was the rumour going around that she actually had a boyfriend. A lot of male content creators say, ‘Pokimane’s channel is just based of male viewers ... they shove the money at her so that she notices them’. I think the main part of it is because she never really talks about her private life such as having a boyfriend or not. That makes sense, because I think if she openly announce that she has a boyfriend then I think that a lot of male viewers would stop watching her.

AmberToTheCore: When I had a boyfriend, all of my subs went down, all my viewership went down, so that was quite an eye-opener. I think men see Twitch as almost like a dating app. They’ve got access to women that they can look at and it’s gaming, which a lot of men are passionate about ... [they] think that you’re single and they treat it as a dating thing. I mean, I know of a lot of girls on there who are not single, but they pretend like they are.

Naliny discusses Pokimane, a highly successful streamer, with over 9.3 million followers on Twitch. Pokimane has been the subject of intense speculation about her private life, including countless articles about her current relationship status. Even as I write this chapter, almost two years on from this interview, today¹⁰ there have been three separate news articles published about whether or not Pokimane has a boyfriend, highlighting how widespread and prolonged the scrutiny has been. Naliny mentions how many men on Twitch disparage Pokimane and her success by suggesting that her audience is only made up of men who want to date her and aim to get her attention by giving significant amounts of money. Naliny speculates that if Pokimane were to reveal that she was in a relationship it could hurt her viewer count. This suggests that many male viewers feel entitled to women’s attention on Twitch, and view them as potential romantic interests, instead of watching them for their content. As a result, female streamers are expected to cater to their male viewers and not threaten this dynamic.

Whilst Naliny details watching one of the biggest female streamers on Twitch being harassed about her relationship status, AmberToTheCore has personally experienced losing subscribers and viewership after mentioning during a stream that she had a boyfriend. AmberToTheCore argues that many men on Twitch use the platform as a dating app, viewing women on Twitch as dating prospects, instead of talented streamers. As a result, this creates a culture wherein female streamers are incentivised to conceal or lie about their relationship status in order to continue to receive viewership and financial support from male viewers, limiting the degree to which they can be authentic and open with their viewers.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented and discussed the experiences of women and non-binary people by grappling with key themes relating to their gender identities and their work on Twitch,

¹⁰ 18th March 2023

whilst examining how this affects the relationships they have with their viewers. The first section discussed the culture on Twitch, arguing that the prevalence of misogynistic and transphobic attitudes contributes towards the active discrimination of women and non-binary people, and often limits their ability to form meaningful connections with their viewers. Such toxic cultures are further fuelled by the lack of accountability for perpetrators, whilst women and non-binary people must take on additional labour to manage their streams to limit offensive and harmful language, and block individuals. This chapter also discussed the standards and expectations that plague women and non-binary people on Twitch, examining the ways in which they are held to narrow constructs of gender and self-expression through gender policing. In what became one of the clearest themes throughout this research, there is a cultural acceptability of constant scrutiny over what women and non-binary people wear, who are ultimately sexualised without their consent regardless of how they dress. Such scrutiny is further amplified for transgender and non-binary individuals, who face pressure to dress in a way that they believe will make people more inclined to notice and respect their gender identity. Finally, participants discussed how viewers have expectations for women and non-binary streamers, such as for their personalities - needing to be polite and quiet - as well as the expectation that they are to be unskilled at games. These expectations are enforced utilising the chat to question the streamer and to undermine their decisions and abilities and reduces the ability of streamers to be their authentic selves. Thus, for participants, experiencing this behaviour from viewers places constraints on the relationships that they are able to develop with their audience, shaping the dynamics of their interaction and influencing the ways in which they present themselves online. Beyond Twitch, the platform forms one element of a wider online gaming culture, wherein women and non-binary people, and many other individuals not covered by this research, face high levels of abuse, criticism, and hostility just by being themselves online. The experiences shared by the respondents in this project strongly suggest that the ability for streamers to form relationships with their viewers is limited by the gender cultures on the platform that facilitate and encourage intense scrutiny and harassment towards marginalised people on the platform, forming an environment which undermines meaningful connection and engagement.

Chapter 4: The Labour of Twitch Streamers

Introduction

The emergence of online streaming platforms such as Twitch has led to new forms of labour practices that challenge traditional notions of employment. Twitch streamers, in particular, engage in various forms of labour in order to start streaming; grow their channel; and for some, earn money from Affiliate or Partner status as well as from third-party sponsorships. This chapter examines the labour practices of Twitch streamers, focusing on four key themes: aspirational labour; affective and emotional labour; blurring of work and leisure; and instability and precarity. This chapter will start with showcasing a ‘day in the life’ of four streamers- two of which are Affiliates and two are Partners. Through this comparison, I aim to illustrate how their labour on Twitch differs and how they manage their time. This chapter will then discuss how streamers make money on Twitch, with a focus on achieving Affiliate and Partner status, exploring how Twitch streamers acquire these statuses, the benefits, and the folklore that accompanies the opaqueness of the process. The next section of this chapter covers aspirational labour. On Twitch, streamers engage in aspirational labour by spending time growing their channel, using social media to build a following and fostering a loyal community, in the hope of finding success on the platform, whilst the overwhelming majority will see very little or no money from this labour. Other types of labour discussed in this chapter are affective and emotional labour, referring to the management of emotions, both their own and those of their audience. This section will examine some of the practices undertaken by streamers to achieve this aim, however this theme will be discussed in greater depth in the chapter on Authenticity (Chapter 7). Moreover, the blurring of work and leisure is a common issue for Twitch streamers, as their workplace is also their home. Streaming does not have imposed limitations on the time spent on the platform and streamers may find that their work and leisure time becomes increasingly interconnected. This section will discuss the ways in which the labour of streamers extends into their leisure time and the pressures that encourage the lack of boundaries between them. Finally, this chapter will discuss instability and precarity on Twitch. This section will outline the limitations on streamers to control their labour on Twitch, such as through being punished for taking time away from the platform, and a discussion on the implementation and imposition of new rules and policies from the platform that impact streamers. Overall, this chapter will link these key themes to the relationships that develop between streamers and their viewers, shedding light on the labour practices of Twitch streamers and their impact on the platform's community and culture.

Day in the Life of a Streamer

One of the first questions I asked each participant was to outline what a day that they were streaming would look like, hoping to gain knowledge about not just streaming, but also the time spent away from Twitch preparing, and utilising social media, as I had seen through my observation of streamers prior to the interviews. I became aware of how before a stream started, many streamers would advertise their stream on Twitter and on other social media platforms. In this section I will outline several experiences from participants with a range of followings and responsibilities.

Ashewyn is a Partnered streamer with over 10,000 followers on Twitch. She typically streams video games playthroughs along with *Just Chatting* streams:

Ashewyn: A typical day for me is about six hours. I think six hours is plenty as a streamer, because it's required six hours of constant socialising, and keeping energy and entertainment up. And honestly, that's more taxing than I can think of some nine to five jobs where you get to retreat for a few hours here and there and do your work ... I hop on, and I'll do my warm-up with my community. The warm-up generally happens on the category on Twitch called Just Chatting and this gives me plenty of room to connect with my community, have chats with them, ask how they're doing, update them on anything going on stream-wise, schedule-wise, and just open up topics. For example, this last month, I've been feeling very moved and sad about the issues ongoing in Palestine and with Palestinians. Just Chatting is a really great place for me to talk about how I'm feeling, bringing awareness to it, tackling the issue, and if it's not just a regular Just Chatting day, it's a themed one. So, twice a week I'll do a science Just Chatting where we watch a science video and learn something new together. Or Feelings Friday, which is my mental health segment where we talk about those feelings that we all experience on a daily basis as human beings and have candid conversations about them, like listening to a podcast that teaches us how to be alone and why that's not a bad thing. Or how to draw boundaries. And so, these warm-up sessions can be anything from freeform chatting before we play games, because that sometimes strips away the ability to sit down and have a serious conversation with each other ... And then after that, I'll dive into a game.

Ashewyn highlights the role of socialising in the labour of streamers, noting how her warm-up routine forms an essential part of her stream, enhancing the relationship with her community. This is achieved through the platform's *Just Chatting* category, which allows for streamers to have candid conversations with their audience about topics that range from mental health to global concerns, such as the ongoing situation in Palestine. Ashewyn's response demonstrates how she takes on the role as facilitator for important conversations, whilst providing their audience with a sense of community and entertainment, using her creativity to form themed segments that are intertwined with her interests and current events. Ashewyn emphasises the value of being able to have such conversations with her audience and indicates that this is one of the most valuable and rewarding elements of streaming for her. Through this communication with viewers, Ashewyn is able to build upon past conversations with viewers, fostering a sense of continuity and connection that extends beyond each individual stream (Johnson, 2019). This platform provides an environment in which to engage in complex conversations, delving into meaningful subjects that transcend superficial small talk. Ashewyn can openly address and explore controversial topics, generating thought-provoking discussions that offer viewers an opportunity to critically engage with different viewpoints. Experiences such as Ashewyn's emphasis how Twitch creates an inclusive space for intellectual discourse, shared experiences, in a way that centres the relationships she has with her viewers and allows for Ashewyn to take the role as a facilitator of an active and engaging virtual community.

Another Twitch Partner, LeeshCapeesh discusses her daily schedule, which she has designed to spend time with her family, whilst maintaining regular streaming hours:

LeeshCapeesh: I stream four to five days a week. In the mornings, specifically Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, I edit videos, I make sure I eat- I'm trying to take care of myself, health-wise, so that way I don't burn out. I edit videos, clips, and stuff to put on my social media. And then I spend time with my family before I go around 10 o'clock to stream. So, basically, I do what I need to do in the morning, have the afternoon and evening to myself and my family and cook and stuff, and then at night is when I stream. I stream from about 10pm to like two in the morning, Eastern Standard Time. I call those the club hours because that's normally like that's like a typical club time.

LeeshCapeesh's response highlights one of the key benefits of streaming in that streamers can choose their own hours, to an extent, affording them time to spend with family, in a way that many other jobs would not accommodate. Although streamers can set their hours, they are also likely to be influenced by where their audience is based, opting for times that align with their viewership. However, streamers such as LeeshCapeesh are still able to fit their streams around their lives, which is often not possible with other forms of labour. LeeshCapeesh also discusses the additional labour she undertakes alongside streaming, to build her profile on the platform, and continue to earn money from streams. This represents a vital task for streamers because they not only have to create content for livestreaming but also need to maintain their online presence through social media platforms, providing clips which can be shared on other platforms such as Twitter and TikTok, driving viewership back to their channel, "becoming an important part of the overall ecology of building as well as maintaining an audience" (Taylor, 2018: 20). Within this form of online labour, the worker is expected to continually be in contact with other users, whilst simultaneously building and expanding on their own social profiles alongside content creation. For streamers, a significant part of their work involves communication using social media, to build their online presence and engage with viewers. Another participant, Annie, an Affiliate, explains why this forms such a vital part of the work of streamers:

Annie: Twitch, famously, is barely a social media platform. Discovery on Twitch is terrible. You don't grow on Twitch, you grow on Twitter, which feeds into Twitch. You grow on YouTube, which feeds onto Twitch.

Annie talks about discovery, referring to the ability to find users using social media. Annie argues that unlike other social media platforms, it is difficult to build a following on Twitch due to a punishing algorithm, that does not prioritise smaller streamers, without first utilising Twitter and YouTube to find new viewers. Bijan Stephen (2019) summarises this issue: "Twitch holds an ocean of content. Its stars are some of the biggest on the internet. In practice, however, it feels like a small town", emphasising the degree to which the biggest streamers dominate the site, whilst small streamers struggle to grow their audience organically on the platform.

Affiliate streamers Riley and Katt Kartel stream alongside their work, fitting in Twitch during their spare time:

Riley: I have two children, so a typical day is us gaming in some way, answering any emails and getting prepared for the stream. That can include having to sort out layouts... fiddling around with alerts and stuff. I'm not as tech savvy as the others so there's a lot of 'Would you mind just telling me where you got that from?', or 'How did you do that?' but admittedly, that is some of the charm of my streams and it's why

people watch me... I guess, [my day] is quite average, really, quite normal, and then, and then I'll stream and hang out with my community and my friends.

Katt Kartel: I've got to do everything else before streaming, so I stream at night, because that's the only time we can get some peace. I'm a pretty small streamer, but I just try to channel myself, get ready, and hit the start button.... I always try to eat beforehand, have my liquids near me, and just try to get myself in the right headspace to approach my stream and I start. That's about it. It's not very complicated.

Both Riley and Katt Kartel stream towards the end of their day, as they work full-time- Riley is a support worker, and Katt Kartel is an artist and counsellor, who also takes in rescue animals and Twitch forms a way of socialising outwith their working hours. For Riley this involves incorporating video games into their streams- something they enjoy doing with their family, whereas Katt Kartel showcases their work as an artist. Twitch forms an “*average*” and “*normal*” part of their day, however, their responses demonstrate some of the additional labour of streaming, such as preparing stream overlays, answering emails, and the emotional labour of getting “*in the right headspace*”.

Making Money on Twitch and Affiliate/Partner Status

The first source of income for streamers on Twitch comes from subscriptions, donations of ‘bits’, and advertisements. Twitch Affiliate and Partner are programs that allow streamers to start to earn money from their channels. The program also restricts users with exclusivity contracts so that they cannot simultaneously stream on multiple platforms at the same time, however, recorded content from livestreams can be uploaded for example to YouTube with further earning possibilities. For Twitch Partners, many streamers have individually negotiated contracts that may not permit them from streaming on other platforms at any time although this is not the case for all Partners. Such agreements are subject to change from Twitch, and thus streamers must be ready to adapt to new rules and even legislation in order to keep streaming and earning on the platform. The precarity of the labour of streamers is discussed in more depth further on in this chapter.

Streamers are first able to monetise their channel, which is to earn money from subscriptions, ‘bits’, and advertisements once they become an ‘Affiliate’. Until they reach this point, all streamers are unable to earn any money directly through Twitch.

To become an Affiliate on Twitch, streamers must meet the following criteria:

1. Reach 50 Followers.
2. Stream for 8 hours.
3. Stream on 7 different days.
4. Have an average of 3 viewers.

Streamers must achieve each of these requirements within a 30-day period in order to qualify. Once these steps have been met, streamers can expect to become Affiliates automatically, and start to earn a percentage of money earned from subscriptions and donations. Although the process for becoming an Affiliate is very straightforward, the process of becoming a Partner on Twitch is much more opaque and is subject of significant speculation across social media platforms. Twitch has approximately 51,500 people in its Partnership program (TwitchTracker), out of a total of 7.57 million active streamers on the platform (Clement,

2023), equating to 0.68%. Thus, for the vast majority of streamers, becoming a Twitch Partner is a goal they are unlikely to reach.

Twitch sets out minimum criteria in order to be considered for Partner as follows:

1. Stream for 25 hours
2. Stream on 12 different days
3. Average of 75 viewers per stream

Twitch emails streamers after the end of each stream with the analytics to indicate how close they are to achieving these criteria, encouraging streamers to work towards Partner as a goal for their channel, analysing their statistics through a practice of “self-surveillance” (Walker, 2014: 438), even for streamers who do not aspire to this achievement. The steps read as an extension of the Affiliate criteria; however, Twitch carefully states, “Please note that the Path to Partner achievement lists the *minimum* criteria we look for in potential Partners and completing them does not guarantee Partnership” (Twitch, n.d.). The rest of the expectations of aspiring Partners are hidden from streamers. However, this has not stopped countless posts on Reddit with “Everything You Need to Know” and YouTube videos offering “Easy Tricks” to “Get Partner Fast”. In these posts and videos, theories are shared about the Partnership process, with some users suggesting that countries such as the USA, UK and Canada are oversaturated with Twitch partners and are less likely to reach their goal, whilst others share their theorised importance of having popular Twitter accounts, and some speculating that it is best to stick to a specific genre of games. These posts form part of the “folk theory”-referring to the “intuitive, informal theories that individuals develop to explain the outcomes, effects, or consequences of technological systems” (DeVito et al., 2017: 3165). The sharing of folk theories about Twitch and its algorithm becomes a way of understanding its working and inclinations, invoking a collective sharing of information through social media, to generate new understandings and tactics to grow their online presence, particularly when it affects their earnings. BoopCreate outlined to me one of the rumours that she had heard about becoming Partnered on Twitch:

BoopCreate: I remember when I initially started streaming... I had heard that Twitch didn't always require an average of 75 viewers to be Partner if you stood out in some way, for example, with unique content that isn't very represented on Twitch, a big presence on another platform, and charity streaming.

BoopCreate mentions the exceptions to the Partnership criteria that she had heard of from social media or discussions with other streamers. These exceptions are particularly interesting as they reveal how Twitch is viewed by streamers and naturally, such processes are not admitted to or even acknowledged by Twitch. The speculated exceptions indicate that individuals who may benefit Twitch in some capacity (bringing a large following from a different platform, being known for charitable work which may reflect well on Twitch, providing content that would not be able to be found on other platforms) may get fast-tracked through the process. There is no concrete evidence for these claims, and as such it is difficult to ascertain whether or not there is any truth to the rumours, however, these ideas do indicate that there is significant speculation surrounding the process and theories generated about who gets prioritised and why. These theories are able to develop due to the lack of transparency from Twitch about the process and an absence of concrete statistics about Partner demographics, forming part of the “algorithmic imaginary” on Twitch (Bucher, 2017).

The speculation around the process of becoming Partner also demonstrates its value to streamers, both as a mark of their success, but also to set them apart from the millions of other streamers on the platform. BonnieSansClyde outlined the importance of these titles:

BonnieSansClyde: Just to have the Affiliate or the Partner badge gives you like, a little bit extra credibility, but “I’m a Twitch Partner” versus “I’m a Twitch Affiliate (with these other 4 million people)”, has a bit of an elite status.

RGBabby is a new streamer on Twitch and as a result, does not yet have Affiliate status, something that she is working towards:

RGBabby: Affiliate would be lovely because with that you get more perks- more people can interact with you, or you can get emotes. And I suppose with Affiliate and Partner, you can make money from it. Of course, it would be a nice bonus, not necessarily an income- I’m not looking for it to be a job. If that comes with it, then that’s great. If I can quit my retail job, that’d be brilliant. But it’s not something that I’ve gone into it wanting.

As RGBabby is not yet an Affiliate, she cannot make money off her streams. However, that has not stopped her from imagining the possibilities of success on the platform, such as quitting her retail job, which she describes as “horrendous”, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. RGBabby’s response draws attention to how making Twitch a career is still considered to be a possibility, even in the face of overwhelmingly negative odds. This allows for streamers to keep up the labour on Twitch with the aim of success, for no earnings in the present.

Reaching Partner provides a tangible metric of success, which is not as apparent with the practice and development of streaming as a craft. As discussed earlier, Twitch “supports and encourages voluntary self-surveillance” (Walker, 2014: 438) through practices such as sending emails to inform streamers about how close they are to achieving Affiliate, as well as emails after each stream providing a summary of the stream through numbers such as the average viewership, and new subscribers. As such, much of the aspirational focus of streamers remains on reaching Affiliate status or being granted Partnership, analysing their performance according to the criteria for each, over other metrics of success such as enjoyment of streaming, streaming as a creative outlet, and developing their broadcasting skillset. Events such as Twitch’s GlitchCon, an online, streamed replacement for their annual TwitchCon¹¹, help to encourage the fostering of such goals. During the livestreams for GlitchCon, the stream would frequently show Twitch Affiliates being made Partner. These segments were accompanied by triumphant music as the streamer is informed of their new status, looking suitably shocked and delighted at the result. One moment that I observed during the event featured streamer Milady Confetti, who immediately got her mother to come through at the news and cried in her arms. Such moments encourage streamers to view reaching Partner as the ultimate goal, and reinforcing the notion that achievement is attainable through dedicated effort and providing inspiration through real success stories. By showcasing what is often an opaque process, these videos aim to provide tangible proof that

¹¹ TwitchCon is a gaming convention for streamers and viewers that takes place twice per year- once in Europe and once in North America. TwitchCon provides an opportunity for streamers to meet their viewers, network with other broadcasters, and other people working within the gaming industry. TwitchCon did not take place in either 2020 or 2021, however they offered an online event, ‘GlitchCon’, as a replacement in 2020.

the path to partnership is achievable, thereby making it seem more within reach for other streamers.

Whilst Affiliate streamers discuss the value of becoming a Twitch Partner, Partnered streamer Jambo has a different view of its importance:

Jambo: People think that you need Partnership to be successful but it's the other way around. I think that Partnership is just a benchmark. It's not the goal. It's not the end game. It's validation, for sure. But it doesn't make you successful, only you can do that.

Jambo addresses what she believes is the misconception that Twitch Partnership is the key to success for streamers. Jambo's response indicates the isolated labour of streamers, in that they are viewed as being solely responsible for their success on the platform, and that the accolades offered by Twitch do not offer any guarantee to them being able to grow their channel. This impression feeds into the aspirational nature of Twitch streaming in that creators view their success as self-determined and spend significant amounts of time improving their skills in the hope of gaining success.

Whilst AmberToTheCore did not harbour ambitions of becoming a full-time streamer, she did note that her earnings on Twitch had been very low:

AmberToTheCore: Once you get to Affiliate level ... they email you this link to put your tax code in. And then once you reach £80 worth of revenue, then they'll send it to you. Now, I've only had two of those and I've been streaming for over a year!

Although AmberToTheCore noted that she had not earned very much despite being on Twitch for a year, she stated that she is “not doing it for the money” and instead values Twitch for the socialising it affords. AmberToTheCore was one of the only participants who outlined exactly how much they earned, and I was very grateful for her candour, as it provides a valuable insight into the true earnings of a significant proportion of streamers on the platform. This is particularly beneficial, as much of the coverage in the media and on social media concerns the top earners, particularly after the Twitch data leak in 2021, which brought to light how much the top creators had earned over a two-year period, with some earning millions, contrasting wildly with the reality for the overwhelming majority of creators on the platform.

Aspirational Labour

With the value of becoming a Twitch Affiliate and Partner, and particularly with the lack of clarity around the process of the latter, many streamers take on labour in the hope of success in the future. As discussed in the Literature Review chapter (Chapter 1), aspirational labour is a “forward-looking, carefully orchestrated, and entrepreneurial form of creative cultural production... aspirational labourers seek to mark themselves as creative producers who will one day be compensated for their talents – either directly or through employment in the culture industries” (Duffy, 2015: 6). Alongside financial incentives, some streamers have other goals for their streams, such as streaming with the aim of building a community with which to share interests, meeting regularly on Twitch to communicate with one another.

The aspirational labour involved in streaming is well exemplified in responses from participants about starting streaming, which may involve them going live to very few followers, if any, in the hope of growing their viewership. Annie describes how she managed to start to build her channel, despite initially feeling “silly”:

Annie: I had many false starts on Twitch. When I started doing it, I would stress myself out about it. And then I stopped. Initially it was the zero viewers phase, I just felt silly, and I just couldn't do it. Then later on, after I finished university, I had gained an insignificant following on Twitter, I had like 200 followers, but it meant that I had maybe three or four friends that would regularly watch and that really took the edge off. And then that got me over my zero viewers anxiety... I just thought, I can sit down and do two hours of streaming, and I get two hours of content back. Whereas if I do YouTube, I sit into two hours of gaming to nobody in a quiet room. And I get maybe like 20-30 minutes of content out of that after editing. So, it just felt inefficient. And I just didn't want to do that.

Annie describes the initial stress and anxiety she experienced when she first tried to stream on Twitch, particularly when no one was watching her streams, making it difficult to talk out loud without anyone offering feedback. By persevering with the aim of gaining more viewers in the future, and taking on additional labour across social media, Annie was able to grow a small following on Twitter that helped to channel viewers to Twitch and ultimately motivate her to continue streaming. This highlights the importance of the behind-the-scenes labour of streamers in growing their social networks, particularly in their early stages of development. This is a theme identified by Johnson (2021), who describes how engaging with other users, watching their streams, stops being “a pure source of enjoyment, but is instead done strategically by the most successful streamers to maximise the volume of potential viewers for *their* channel” (10). Thus, on Twitch, genuine connections coexist with strategic networking efforts aimed at maximising viewership and channel growth, demonstrating the role of aspirational labour in building relationships.

Whilst Annie highlights her difficulties in finding her audience on Twitch, she does draw attention to one of the benefits of livestreaming in comparison to other content creation platforms like YouTube, noting that it can be a more efficient way to produce content, rather than an edited, shorter video that requires additional labour to produce. This points towards a key motivation for many streamers, which is to maximise their productivity and output, along with the ability to engage with their viewers live. Despite having a small following at present, still hopes to be able to earn a living on Twitch:

Annie: I would aspire to having full time streaming part of my career. I'm not aspiring to get like 20,000 views a stream or anything like that, I just want it to be enough where I can stream, and people watch, and it doesn't make an enormous amount of money. That would be amazing, that would be perfect. I wouldn't want anything above that.

Annie notes her desire to grow her following but notes that she is not looking for the success that the top earners on Twitch have, with thousands of viewers each stream, which she described as being “scary” due to the high speed of the chat, and the ability to keep up, losing the relationship with the viewers. Instead, Annie sets more modest goals of having regular viewers and earning some money from a hobby that she enjoys.

Like Annie, Bella discusses her aims to make streaming her career, but acknowledges that it is not likely to happen in the near future:

Bella: When I first started streaming, I just knew I wanted to stream and maybe do that as a hobby but then I realised that I loved it even more than I thought I would... I would love to see this grow into something bigger for me and my life. I feel genuinely happy when I'm streaming, and I feel like I'm doing something that I am capable of and that I am continually improving at, and if this was something I could feasibly dedicate my whole life to, I would. At the moment, that's not really an option financially. While not sufficient to live on, the money I have made has helped me improve my stream quality. I think almost all of what I've made so far has gone back into the stream one way or another. Realistically, I don't know if I'll ever reach a point where I can live off streaming. That's the 'pie in the sky' goal for me at the moment. More realistically, I would really love to be able to go from Affiliate to Partner and continue building my audience. I would love to reach more and more people and make my existing community even more welcoming.

Bella's response highlights the complexity of aspirational labour on Twitch, as she highlights the joy that streaming brings her, but she feels she must remain realistic with her goals. Although Bella streams as a hobby, the aspirational labour becomes apparent as she notes a desire for streaming to become a bigger part of her life, potentially even a full-time job, however, financial limitations prevent this from being a feasible option. Bella describes how the money she has earned has been invested into improving her stream quality, which further emphasises the aspirational nature of streaming, as the need to constantly improve, upgrade in the hope that this aids her ability to find success on the platform and to continue to attract and retain viewers, despite the "pie in the sky" odds.

Affective and Emotional Labour

As discussed in the Literature Review (Chapter 1), streaming involves affective and emotional labour in order to meet the expectations of others and generate positive emotions from viewers. Exploring the emotional and affective labour of Twitch streamers provides insight into the pressures and challenges associated with streaming on the platform, offering an understanding for the importance of maintaining boundaries, which will be discussed further on in this thesis. For Frazley, managing other people's emotions, in particular, keeping the peace amongst her viewers, is not something that she enjoys about streaming but acknowledges that it forms an essential part of her labour on Twitch:

Frazley: I used to joke that it feels like you're on playground duty. I don't mean to trivialise all the hurt feelings, but sometimes you just want to stream and not have to deal with all the relationship stuff. But I have to. I have to work with the community, and I have to manage all this stuff.

In this response, Frazley describes the emotional and affective labour that is required of Twitch streamers, particularly those with an engaged and active community, as she has from her 1,900 followers. Frazley notes a sense of responsibility to not only produce her content but to ensure that her viewers are content and engaging with each other in a way that she feels is appropriate. She compares this to 'playground duty', given her requirement to mediate conflicts and ensure the wellbeing of her audience, taking on the responsibility of managing

their emotions, although she notes that she does not want to 'trivialize' such work, as it forms an important part of creating a positive environment on her channel. Frazley must take on emotional labour in order to regulate her own emotions while streaming and interacting with her audience, in particular maintaining a positive attitude, being engaging, and managing any frustration or stress that arises during her streams, despite indicating that she can feel frustrated about having to deal with “*all the relationship stuff*”. Frazley also undertakes affective labour by creating a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere on her channel, fostering a sense of community among her viewers, and generating positive emotional experiences for them. This can involve not only managing any conflicts and mediating interactions but also actively cultivating feelings of connection and entertainment for her viewers (Hardt and Negri, 2004).

Another example of emotional and affective labour is offered by SaraBelle, who describes the processes she enacts to generate the required emotions in herself but also in her viewers:

*SaraBelle: On a Saturday I usually wake up and get in the mode for streaming. I go right down to my downstairs computer, which is where my streaming area is, I turn on some VOD¹² from a streamer who I really feel inspired by, like, their content is something I try to emulate. I watch their stuff to get in the mood to stream ... I really have to, like, buoy myself up, if you've ever seen *The Office*, Dwight, turns on rock music and gets all amped up and stuff. That's sort of what I feel like I have to do. Because you know, you have to have on-screen charisma, I have to get into that mindset. And then after, I usually do a little bit of cleaning around my apartment, just vacuum and stuff so that, you know, the space looks welcoming and comfortable ... Like, I just want it to look like my home is a welcoming space so that my Twitch channel can be a welcoming space.*

SaraBelle outlines the emotional and affective labour that she undertakes for her streams. From watching content from other streamers SaraBelle is able to draw inspiration and motivation to improve her own content, drawing on their emotional energy. Such behaviour indicates her awareness that she needs to present in a way that is “*amped up*” in order to appeal to viewers and hold their attention (Ruberg and Cullen, 2019), which also requires SaraBelle to manage her emotions through ‘deep’ acting (Hochschild, 1983). SaraBelle also discusses the labour of creating a welcoming space for viewers, which she achieves by cleaning and organising her streaming area in her home. Through this domestic and affective labour, SaraBelle aims to create a positive atmosphere through the cultivation of her home environment, in order to generate positive feelings from viewers, making them feel part of the community. Such behaviour draws awareness to the “physical, embodied, intimate materiality of the home as a key locus for making space through the digital” (Ruberg and Lark, 2021: 681), and the development of the “home as a ‘space of exhibition’ (683), , demonstrating how streaming can also encompass domestic labour. Such domestic labour alongside emotional labour contributes to the performances that constitute gender (Butler, 2006), in order to “communicate emotional messages of care and responsibility towards one another and to garner emotional energy... aligning their gender identity to the emotional needs of the other, embedding emotional messages of care and commitment into their gender practices” (Johnson, 2010: 703).

¹² VOD stands for video on demand. On Twitch, VOD often refers to the recorded stream after a streamer has gone live.

The Blurring of Work and Leisure

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the labour of streamers does not just take place whilst they are live on Twitch, but extends into their off-stream lives, including preparing stream overlays, setting up their streaming environment, and the use of social media to promote their streams and engage with their community. Responses from the research participants demonstrate the significant effort and time that goes into streaming, particularly due to “how effortlessly it slips into off-camera life” (Johnson, 2021: 15). This is noted by Robin, who has a small following of around 300 people and takes time during her work break to check in with her viewers on social media:

Robin: On my break I try to be super interactive with my Discord and Twitter. I would let people know when my next stream would be and what it will be ... After dinner I would start a stream either around 9pm or 11pm and it can last until 2 in the morning or, like today, 5am.

Robin highlights the labour involved in taking time off from Twitch. Even when she is not streaming, she still has to inform her viewers of her next plans to stream and also keep up with messages across other social media platforms. Her response highlights how labour on Twitch extends much further than livestreaming, there are also expectations of being active across social media in order to keep her followers engaged and encourage return viewers. Robin’s response shows how streamers try to attend to the “neoliberal demands of work” through being available to her viewers, “even when they are supposedly off the clock” (Guarriello, 2019: 1759).

Given the blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure for streamers, it can be difficult to switch off from the pressure to keep working at their stream, and to devote spare time to improving their channel. This is something that BoopCreate has experienced, as she notes that she now finds it difficult to play video games for her own enjoyment as she is so used to streaming them:

BoopCreate: Since I've started streaming, even when I play games off stream, I will still have an internal monologue like, 'This is what I'd say if I was streaming'. But I typically try to quieten those thoughts ... Especially lately, I play different games off-stream than I do on-stream And I've started a lot of new games recently- I don't want to start too many new games on stream and not necessarily lose viewers, but it makes it a difficult choice of what game to stream. So, I just quieten those thoughts and just really immerse myself in the story versus thinking about a million different things at once.

BoopCreate identifies the importance of setting boundaries between work and leisure, particularly the need to switch off from their labour on Twitch. As she enjoys playing video games to relax, one of the ways she maintains separation is by playing different games off-stream, to keep her labour on Twitch and her leisure time separate. This deliberate shift between games serves as a clear demarcation between streaming and her leisure time, however, this also draws awareness to the ways in which the choices of streamers and their labour on Twitch can be strongly guided by the viewership, as she considers which games would maximise her success on Twitch through attracting and retaining viewers, instead of the games that she would choose. Overall, BoopCreate’s response provides insight into the

complex and dynamic nature of the labour of Twitch streamers, where work and play are intertwined, and boundaries between them are blurred, but also actively managed, illustrating how “off-camera work inevitably intrudes into what viewers perceive as downtime, and indeed what streamers might expect to be downtime when they begin broadcasting” (Johnson, 2021, 4).

As a Twitch Partner, Jambo discusses the pressure that surrounds streamers to be constantly available and engaging with viewers, which she attributes to a culture of overwork and expectations on Twitch:

Jambo: I feel like Twitch viewership fluctuates so often, and, and it varies completely on different factors, I don't believe my taking a day off is one of those factors. I think I did for a long time. Because when I started streaming for the first two years, there were a lot of really toxic people around that and there was that mindset of, 'You've gotta keep grinding', or 'If you're playing a game, you may as well stream it' and 'If you take time off, if you take a break, people are gonna forget about you'.

Jambo indicates that a subset of users on Twitch perpetuate the idea that streamers cannot take time away from streaming and must keep up the ‘grind’. She identifies these people as “toxic”, due to the pressure they put on creators through sharing these beliefs. Although Jambo connects the pressure to never take a break and to stream constantly to “toxic people”, responses from other participants indicate that these beliefs are widely held, and that such breaks result in substantial losses in viewership, as is discussed further on in this chapter. With Jambo’s significant following, with one of the highest follower counts from the sample, her understandings and acknowledgement of the “toxic” culture on Twitch will likely have impacted her in different ways from smaller creators. This larger follower count comes with some greater stability in that she can likely afford to take some time away from Twitch safe in the knowledge that even if a small percentage were to leave her channel, she would still have a substantial following and she notes, “without me, there’s no channel, there’s no content”. For smaller creators, the loss of even a few followers can knock them back on their journey to reach Affiliate or Partner status and dramatically reduce their viewer count, and ability to earn money on the platform.

Instability and Precarity

Whilst this chapter has illustrated some of the benefits from streaming, such as socialising, and for some, earning money, the labour of Twitch streamers can be precarious, with their work subject to swift changes from viewership or from the platform itself, leaving streamers vulnerable to loss of earnings and followers. As described by Bingham (2020) the “tenuous and unpredictable nature of streaming as a profession” (276) requires for streamers to develop the “ability to thrive in uncertainty and adapt to changing markets” (283). Under these neoliberal capitalist conditions, the “responsibility for managing precarity sits squarely on the shoulders of individual creators, who are tasked with keeping up with a frenetic pace of content output and spreading their labor across many platforms to mitigate the risk of failure” (Glatt, 2022: 3865). This is evidenced on Twitch from participant responses which describe how after taking a break from streaming, they had lost viewers and significant progress towards growing their channel. UhhGabi is a Twitch Affiliate whose channel grew fast, but needed to take a short hiatus from streaming:

UhhGabi: I started [streaming] for fun, and I was doing really well. But I stopped because I was really busy with school, and then mental health stuff and I just started again, like a week and a half ago. So right now, I think my goal is to build my channel back up to where it was.

UhhGabi found that during the time in which they were away from Twitch in order to manage school as well as their mental health, their channel started to decline in terms of viewership. This was a trend noted by many of the participants: if they took any time off, they may return to reduced viewership. The sudden and drastic loss of followers means that streamers may be inclined not to take breaks from streaming as it could affect their channel, and for those who earn money from streaming, it would likely affect their earnings. For UhhGabi, streaming was only meant to be “*fun*”, alongside their work as a pharmacy technician, but now they feel that they must make a concerted effort to gain back their lost viewership.

Like UhhGabi, FunnyLilSpoonie and Naliny also faced repercussions from taking time away from streaming:

FunnyLilSpoonie: I think I have about 100 followers. It went back a little bit when I took the break... since going down, it's been wonderful just having even just one or two viewers coming.

Naliny: When I started streaming, because I had a jumpstart, because I was talking to that YouTuber. I was in a couple of his videos, and he promoted my YouTube channel and my streams as well. So, I had a jumpstart, I think 200 followers. But then I took a break from streaming for half a year. Now it's hard to come back to streaming because I have a lot of ghost followers. I don't think they actually know that they're still following me- they either stopped using Twitch or don't want to watch me anymore. Now, if I stream once or twice a week, I get three or four viewers.

Both FunnyLilSpoonie and Naliny discuss the impact to their viewership following a break from streaming. Naliny mentions how after taking some time off from streaming she came back to “*ghost followers*” referring to the inactive accounts that still follow her channel. This is particularly difficult for Naliny as it shows her as still having these followers, but her viewing figures do not match this figure due to the inactivity of some of the accounts. This can be disheartening for a streamer who spent time building up their following and to come back after a break and not have the viewership expected.

As Twitch streamers fundamentally rely on the functioning and use of the platform to facilitate their streams, this requires streamers to adhere to the expectations and rules set forth by Twitch in order to maintain their position on the platform. Twitch has been criticised for the lack of transparency behind bans and suspensions, with some streamers having faced sudden and unexpected account terminations as a result. This creates a significant degree of instability and uncertainty for streamers, who may rely on the platform for their income and livelihood. The banning of streamers, including hot tub streamers is discussed further in the chapter on Gender (Chapter 3). This precarity of Twitch streamers is noted by Ashewyn:

Ashewyn: We never really know how the landscape will change over the years and our jobs are not a certainty. Everything can change overnight, like with the DMCA issues have been happening in the last year and how we've had to navigate away from

using copyright music and even games that display copyright music. Some creators don't even stream anymore, because their whole identity and brand was surrounding copyrighted content, like Just Dance streams, for example. I cannot really have very forward-thinking ambitions because I need to be flexible to change.

Ashewyn highlights the lack of control that streamers have over their channels, demonstrating how everything can be taken away at will by the platform from policy changes without warning. As such, it can be hard for streamers to have confidence in streaming as a career, particularly around their earnings, given that sudden changes can result in their channel being removed overnight. Ashewyn references the controversy around the game *Just Dance* which uses licensed music and players must copy the dance moves as accurately as possible to score points. Unfortunately, despite the *Just Dance* category being exceptionally popular on Twitch, following a wave of Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) takedown requests, streamers who continued to stream the game and include the music faced copyright strikes and bans. For streamers that had built their following from streaming this game, they had to move to an alternative game or quit streaming altogether. Ashewyn highlights the lack of control that streamers have over their channels, demonstrating how everything can be taken away at will by the platform from policy changes, without warning. This “ability to thrive in uncertainty and adapt to changing markets is standard practice for the contemporary neoliberal subject” (Bingham, 2020: 283) and as a result, even the most successful streamers must operate in a highly unpredictable landscape, adapting to ever-changing preferences, site policies, algorithms, and laws, in order to maintain their channels and income, vulnerable to sudden shifts in the market or platform policies. The outlined experiences of streamers emphasise the broader neoliberal entrepreneurialism on Twitch (Johnson et al., 2019), wherein individuals are left to navigate the complexities of streaming on their own, managing the risks and navigating changes, contributing to a lack of permanence for streamers which may drive streamers to spend more time taking on aspirational labour, growing their channels in the hope that it provides more stability and for their viewership to stay with them throughout the changes. Regardless of the impact had on individual streamers, the “revenue generating machine marches on... should a channel shrink or a genre go out of fashion, another will take its place”, continuing to earn money for the platform (Postigo, 2016: 345).

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the labour involved in Twitch streaming, focusing on key themes of aspirational labour, emotional labour, and precarity. First, this chapter discussed how Twitch streamers engage in multiple forms of labour to maintain their channels, produce content, and interact with their audience, while also trying to achieve higher levels of success. This connects to ideas of aspirational labour for which streamers take on further work to promote their streams and build followings, and continuous improvement in order to find further success on the platform, growing their viewership and building communities. Alongside aspirational labour, streamers also engage in emotional labour to manage their emotions whilst streaming, and affective labour to generate positive emotions from their viewers. This chapter then discussed the blurring of boundaries between work and leisure time. Whilst some participants outlined the role of streaming in maintaining their social lives, often categorising streaming as a hobby, other streamers identified Twitch as their full-time job. Several participants drew awareness to the long hours spent both on Twitch but also in maintaining their social media presence and growing their channel. Finally, this chapter

outlined the ways in which Twitch streaming can be insecure and precarious, such as from a loss of viewers when taking a break, and from policy changes from the platform that stop streamers from having control over their content. Overall, this chapter has aimed to illustrate how the labour of streamers is intertwined with the relationships they build with their viewers, particularly through the emotional and affective labour that underpins these interactions. For streamers, the very nature of streaming involves making and sustaining these connections with viewers through this labour, and finding success on the platform, including financial gain, depends on the viewer engagement and community building practices outlined in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Intimacy, Co-Presence, and Community on Twitch

Introduction

As the first chapters of this thesis have aimed to illustrate, Twitch provides an ideal focus for analysis on digital relationships. Forming a crucial element of streaming, forming relationships with viewers is key to success. This chapter focuses on the experiences of women and non-binary streamers, examining the development and maintenance of intimacy between the streamers and their viewers, shedding light on the diverse ways in which connection, closeness, and community emerge on the platform.

The first section of this chapter will address parasocial relationships, which were brought up several times in interviews by participants. This section will analyse how streamers understand their role in the relationships with viewers, drawing upon the concept of parasociality, and the implications this has for both streamers and viewers. This chapter's second section explores how streamers form an understanding of community, which assumes a distinct meaning within the Twitch platform. This section highlights the crucial role community plays within the streaming experience and examines the mechanisms by which it aids in the development of intimacy. In addition, regular viewership forms an essential component to the relationships between streamers. In the third section of this chapter the significance of having a committed audience for streamers will be explored, along with the ways in which streamers cultivate and maintain strong bonds with their regular viewers. A list of all participants and their followings on Twitch can be found in the *Methods* chapter (Chapter 2) in order to understand the viewership of each participant. The fourth section of this chapter examines the factors that contribute to the development of closeness and friendship on Twitch, and the limitations on these relationships. The fifth section of this chapter will examine how co-presence contributes towards the development of intimacy on the platform, analysing how streamers and viewers experience a shared presence in the streamer's digital space, fostering a sense of togetherness despite physical distance. In the sixth section, the processes of offering self-disclosure and providing support, and care are discussed, arguing that they greatly contribute to the intimacy developed on the platform. Finally, the seventh section briefly examines the migration of relationships from online to offline, and the implications of face-to-face encounters between streamers and viewers.

Overall, this chapter seeks to examine the intimacy involved in the work of streamers and to analyse the different ways they understand their relationship with their viewers, highlighting the practices involved in cultivating intimacy, including their limitations in this digital context. Through analysing the development of intimacy, and the limitations on the relationships that take place both on Twitch as well as those that migrate to other environments, this chapter aims to offer new understandings of how streamers grow communities and foster friendships on the platform, alongside the challenges this presents.

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships refer to a relationship that is perceived by the viewer with a public figure in the media, such as a celebrity. Typically, these relationships are characterised by a lack of reciprocity, and are conducted within a limited context. Parasocial relationships are

built through repeated parasocial interaction such as “responses of affinity, interest, friendship, identification, similarity, liking, or imitation” (Schiappa et al., 2005: 96).

Unlike opportunities to fleetingly meeting a celebrity or other public figure, viewers on Twitch are able to attempt to communicate with streamers regularly, with methods guaranteed to get their attention- even the most popular streamers on Twitch will thank and acknowledge subscribers and will give particular attention to those who give sizeable donations or gift subscriptions to other users. Research from Wulf et al. (2021) found that this acknowledgment of users is positively affected experiences of parasocial interaction, which may encourage further donations from viewers. To a certain degree this openly commodifies the intimacy between viewers and streamers as the time and attention of the streamer can be bought. However, building a relationship with a streamer does not necessarily require subscription or donation. Those who participate regularly in the chat may also be able to communicate in the chat, and have their username recognised by the streamer through being active in the community. Although interactive media such as Twitch streaming allows for “a heightened sense of closeness and familiarity created by two-way interaction”, alongside the sharing of personal information (Click et al., 2013: 365), many relationships on Twitch remain one-sided, with communication typically coming one-way, in communities centred around the streamer. Furthermore, Twitch streams are typically several hours long, with some streamers even broadcasting for 12 hours or more. This allows for viewers to spend a long amount of time with a streamer, becoming familiar with their mannerisms, learning information about them and offering prolonged and repeated access to the streamer. This is also live, so all interactions take place in real-time, heightening the sense of shared space and time together, unfiltered by editors or producers. Thus, Twitch presents a “convergence of parasocial and interpersonal interactions” (Leith, 2021: 111) that forms a complex area of study. Several research participants demonstrated an understanding and awareness of parasocial relationships, discussing the ways in which relationships with viewers can be understood within certain limitations. Here, Annie discusses how she holds back in her relationships with viewers:

Annie: I feel I do have some regulars who I do [feel close to]. I'm careful [with relationships and friendships with viewers] pre-emptively. I'm not a celebrity or anything, so I don't take it super seriously, but there is a level of a parasocial relationship going on.

Annie indicates how she is cautious about forming relationships and friendships with her viewers due to the possibility for it to feel parasocial, indicating a sense of responsibility towards her viewers, managing their emotions towards her. Annie also emphasises the distinction between herself and a celebrity, implying that although she may not have the same level of fame or recognition, particularly as a smaller channel with around 100 followers, she recognises how streaming can form one-sided relationship dynamic because viewers are exposed to her in a way that is not able to be reciprocated. However, such relationships are still able to provide Annie with a sense of companionship and connection, as well as dedicated viewers who support her streams.

Like Annie, BoopCreate is also aware of the potential for relationships on Twitch to be considered parasocial:

BoopCreate: I think there's this very tricky element of Twitch with parasocial-like relationships and stuff. And that's something that I've had to deal with, and I try to be

open with people like, 'I am not the way I am on stream like 24/7. You know how I am on stream, but this is not how I am in real life'.

BoopCreate's response indicates that she feels a sense of responsibility to remind people that there are limitations on this relationship and that they do not know her in the same way as people offline. By emphasising that she is not the same person as she is off-stream, BoopCreate aims to manage viewers' expectations and prevent any potential overstepping of boundaries.

Community

Almost every interview conducted for this research discussed the importance of finding and building a community on Twitch, which on the platform refers to individuals who tune in to watch and engage with their content providing their company and often financial support. Whilst streamers may have an audience, their community are those who are regular viewers, and those who interact not only in the chat, but across other social media channels with both the streamer and other viewers. These communities are built around shared interest in the streamer's content and often have unique emotes, references, and inside jokes that are developed through regular interactions in the chat and long-standing viewership. As described by Hilvert-Bruce et al. (2018), "Shared experiences and continued participation in live-streams helps to develop connectedness with other stream participants and fosters a sense of community in the channel" (59) and one such example of this that I have observed is in the stream for the sisters Alexandra and Andrea Botez who broadcast chess games on the Twitch channel BotezLive. After Alexandra repeatedly blundered her queen in online chess games, her viewers came up with the in-joke, 'Botez Gambit'. Whilst 'gambit' in chess typically refers to a strategic sacrifice, the 'Botez Gambit' is a mocking way of referring to an accidental loss of the queen, for which Alexandra became known. From this in-joke, viewers would feel motivated to engage in the chat whenever such a blunder took place, with shared understanding amongst regular viewers. Alexandra's acknowledgement and embrace of the 'Botez Gambit' further cemented it as part of the shared identity of the stream, and it ultimately grew beyond her stream to the wider chess community.

In a streamer's community, many of the individuals involved are known to the streamer and may take on additional roles such as moderators. For streamers, communities provide their core viewership for each stream, whilst for the viewers, Twitch communities offer like-minded individuals to connect with and spend time together, whilst watching the streamer. As I outlined earlier in this thesis, the participants for this research had a wide range of following on Twitter, from under 100 to well over 25,000. As a result, participants have very different experiences of interacting with viewers, which are reflected in their responses.

Auden Crossing outlined the ways in which viewers become her understanding of 'community' on Twitch:

Auden Crossing: I was able to quickly foster a very real sense of community that [comes from] people being a part of my stream... being in my chat, when they interact, and they get to be involved... then they just feel more connected and like they know you. And it becomes less of watching this person on the internet and more like hanging out with your group of friends. It's been really nice, and I feel like that's why people stay.

One way that streamers can build their community and discoverability is through the use of tags. Twitch allows streamers to add tags to their stream before they go live, which are then searchable so that streamers can reach new viewers who are interested in that tag. For example, a streamer can add the game they are playing, the language the stream is in, and personal characteristics and identities such as ‘Deaf’, ‘LGBTQIA’, and ‘Latina’. These tags help to find other users with similar interests and Annie discusses how this creates a baseline of knowledge within her community:

Annie: I also use the LGBTQIA+ tag on Twitch. Then they know the deal when they come in and I don't have to explain to any of them what being trans is or what being gay is like. I never have to have those conversations with those people. I only ever have to touch on anything like that when random people show and even then, it's not very often.

Annie mentions how by using the LGBTQIA+ tag on Twitch, the people that find her stream are often those who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community themselves or are supportive and knowledgeable. For Annie, this means that she can avoid uncomfortable and repetitive questions about being transgender and LGBTQIA+ as many of the people joining are as well. For Annie's community, the tags help to find other LGBTQIA+ people to connect with based around a shared interest and experiences (Persaud and Perks, 2022). Tags also help Annie to create a community that begins from and has privileged access to shared knowledge and experience, which Jamieson (2011) describes as one of the sets of practices that enable the development of intimacy. Moreover, as communities are formed around a streamer, the streamer has an expected duty to ensure that members adhere to the values that they have set out, such as being supportive and welcoming to LGBTQIA+ members, and that people do not offend other users through insensitive or bigoted comments. Although this does not happen frequently in Annie's streams, her response highlights the affective labour involved in maintaining a connection with her audience, informing those who do not abide by the community's values or removing them if they continue to act in this way, in order to protect her community.

Similarly, Bella also uses the LGBTQIA+ tag which she says has helped her reach a few new viewers:

Bella Stuart: Besides those people who came in through my Twitter presence, I think now my viewer community is probably more like 25-50% people I have met through streaming, or just people who randomly came into my stream through looking through a tag or something. Twitch analytics says that I have been found through the LGBTQIA+ tag a few times, and I know some people have come into the stream because of a niche game I was playing at the time.

Bella takes an active interest in how her viewers have found her stream, and her use of tags indicates a conscious effort to connect with specific communities and interests. As a result, she has brought together people in an environment where they can discuss these interests, building new connections as well as engaging with her stream. This has been particularly helped by Bella playing a game which is less popular on Twitch and thus anyone wanting to watch content for the game was more likely to come across her channel.

Finding a niche on Twitch can be a successful way of growing a community and finding more people to connect with. SaraBelle and Riley have found that they have been able to build their communities based around their own interests and note that their streams can be an environment in which more obscure and less-mainstream interests are celebrated:

SaraBelle: A lot of people that use Twitch, they feel like misfits. I would say that the communities on Twitch are the nerds of our society. They're the people that really enjoy playing video games, if you think about the video game aspect of Twitch specifically. Or if we're thinking about the art or the makeup side of Twitch, you know, there might be drag artists on there, who can be misfits of society, you know. So, I think that people that are on Twitch want someone who shows that they care about your existence. The people who might be misfits to the eyes of 'normal society'. But you're welcome here, you're celebrated here.

Riley: I was always the weird friend in my friendship circles but I'm not the weird friend anymore. I am with the weirdos- that is the best way of putting it. Because I found my people. It's strange, but it's nice.

AudenCrossing: I never had a friend group that I felt like I fit in with, all through growing up my entire life, even now, like I've never been part of a friend group- I've just been like friends with people here and there. So, the thing about Twitch is that I got to create my own community, and decide how I wanted that to look, how I wanted that to feel and make it a place that I would be comfortable.

SaraBelle, Riley, and AudenCrossing indicate the role of community in developing intimacy between streamers and their viewers, noting the ability for Twitch to bring together individuals who identify as outsiders, particularly those who may face marginalisation elsewhere, including in other streams on Twitch. Furthermore, these responses indicate that building a community on Twitch is not only about finding like-minded individuals (Harris, 2019) but also about actively creating a space where one feels comfortable and understood and even celebrated, fostering a sense of belonging (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019b). Although these participants outline the benefits for building a community on Twitch, the process for finding new viewers, communicating with them, or building a Discord channel can form part of aspirational labour, in which streamers take on this labour in the hope of future gains. In return, the more people that join a stream, the higher the viewership numbers for the streamer, which leads to more opportunities for becoming Twitch Affiliate or Partner, in addition to subscribers and donations. Therefore, there is a considerable financial incentive for streamers to build communities and committed viewers, forming part of the affective labour of streamers, which cannot be separated from the desire to build communities around mutual interests.

Regular Viewership

'Regulars' are viewers who show up frequently for streamers' broadcasts, engaging and interacting in the chat. These viewers have typically been involved in the chat and the streamer's community for a significant period of time and have achieved a level of recognition from the streamer. On Twitch, users create unique usernames with which to make comments and communicate with one another. This provides a level of anonymity on the platform meaning that typically, very little information is known about users in the chat,

other than what they offer in the form of messages. In this setting, even without knowing each other's names, criteria are developed which make a user stand out in the chat. This includes commenting frequently during the streams and engaging with other users, offering knowledge about the games being played (although this can be frowned upon in some streams), or contributing financially to the streamer. Such actions are likely to make a streamer, and subsequently other viewers, remember and recognise their username and be more willing to communicate with them if they notice their username in the chat. Although streamers and viewers do not typically engage in face-to-face communication, spending time together and granting privileged access to time are acknowledged as practices that build intimacy (Jamieson, 2011). On Twitch, such practices allow for streamers to establish a loyal and engaged audience and for intimacy to develop within the relationships between streamers and their regulars.

Bex_Bomb has found that her viewership has evolved a lot over time. However, those that had been entrusted with moderation abilities or were granted VIP status have stayed loyal with their viewership:

Bex_Bomb: There are people that come into my chat that haven't done it for like a couple years as well you do see like a little bit of almost a rotation, so my chat is very different to how it was when I first started. That's sometimes good but sometimes sad, like I'm still friends with a lot of those people that used to come and hang out and my channels but maybe not so much anymore, just the way life goes on. But there are definitely people that I've made VIP or moderators that I appreciate very much, and I'd love to hang out with them IRL¹³, and spend time with them. And aside from that, I find Discord is a really good community builder as well. I really enjoy chatting to people who would normally be on my streams in Discord just throughout the day, which has also been really nice in the pandemic.

Bex_Bomb found that many of the people who joined her streams at the start are no longer regulars in her streams but, on the other hand, it seems that she has greater intimacy with those who have endured. Viewers that she gave VIP or moderator status have stayed and she enjoys a closer relationship with them, particularly from being in contact over the span of several years, echoing the findings from Wohn (2019) regarding streamer-moderator relationships. This could be because these viewers have been entrusted with responsibility for the stream, and have incentive to keep being involved, but also because Bex_Bomb was likely to have picked regulars with whom she has already built a relationship prior to giving them VIP or moderator status. Bex_Bomb utilises Discord to ensure that she keeps in contact with viewers when she is off stream.

For streamers, the dynamics of their steam can change quite literally overnight, with dramatic changes in their viewership and the gain, or loss, of viewers. After spending time building a relationship with their viewers, a sudden influx of new names in the chat can dilute the connection between a streamer and their audience. Alternatively, it can provide a lot of new people to the community, joining in with the conversation.

For Erin, the growth of her channel has resulted in less activity in her chat:

¹³ IRL stands for 'in real life'.

Erin: When my averages were in the teens and 20s, people were just more likely to chat. If I'm in a chat within the 10s or in the 20s, I am more likely to try to keep the chat going. Because I know that as a streamer, dead chat is terrible. It happens but it's not fun: it makes you feel like you're alone, it's terrible. So, I think that people chatted more when it was smaller. And now if I have 50 people chilling, dead chat happens more often now. Because they're like, well, there's a bunch of people here so they aren't going to say anything. Those people that were there helping when it was in the teens and 20s, those people that would chime in and put a song in the queue and, and say something ... I think that the quality of the chat and my relationship with it has suffered. I know that's common- it's not anything I don't already know, because I've watched it happen to other people too, and that part's frustrating. But I also love when new people come in and just start spamming love in the chat, 'I came in with this raid, and I'm back and I checked you out'. It's amazing. And finding these super fans is really great. But it doesn't matter how many people are in the chat at this point. I know it's just going to be dead sometimes ... It's just not as active as it used to be. You'd think it'd be the other way around, but it's just not.

Erin found that when her viewership increased, people were less inclined to participate in the chat which she believes is because people feel less incentivised to message when there are lots of other people who could have joined in but have not. With fewer viewers watching the stream, there is less pressure on messages posted by viewers, especially when there is only a handful of people who could respond. With a small number of viewers, individuals can know one another through their contributions and feel comfortable sharing experiences from their own lives to a relatively small audience. This is also noted by Hilvert-Bruce et al. (2018), who found that “socially and community-motivated engagement was associated with greater emotional connection, time spent, and financial contribution to live-streams, particularly for smaller channels” Thus, as Erin’s channel has grown in viewership, each message posted in chat are being seen by considerably more people, all of whom are able to comment, and are unlikely to know the viewer in the same way as they would have in a smaller community.

Radders has found that when her channel quickly grew due to participating in a multi-channel network for content creators, the regulars she had at the beginning stayed. And subsequently, when she faced a drop in viewers, following leaving the company, her regulars were once again there to watch her streams:

Radders: I had an initial community when I first started, like a group of people who were there from right at the beginning. And over the years, they've stuck around the whole time. And then there was a couple years where I was in The Yogscast when my viewer count grew massively, and my number of subscribers was way higher, and things like that, because, you know, I was in a big content creation company. And when I left, it was, it was like, nope, you were never there in the beginning. And then it was just all my originals again. So, I'm really, really grateful and fortunate and thankful that the people that were there at the start have remained. Because it means that I've always been able to keep my community consistent regardless of whether we had extra viewers from me being in other content. There was always that stable backbone there to keep the community alive.

Radders reflects on the shifts in her Twitch viewership and the role that regular viewers play in her community on the platform. When Radders first started streaming, she built a small initial community that has kept up their engagement with her streams. From the long-term

presence from these viewers, serving as the “backbone” of her streams, Radderrss has been able to navigate changes and fluctuations in her channel's growth while maintaining a consistent and supportive environment. Radderrss’ appreciation for her original viewers emphasises the emotional connection that streamers can develop towards their long-term viewers and their importance to the labour of streamers.

For LeeshCapeesh, who has amassed a following of over 40,000, the most pressing issue is being able to follow along with the chat, as so many messages are sent by viewers that it becomes impossible to follow:

LeeshCapeesh: It's harder for me to keep up with chat because there's so many people in there now, but I do my best. It is harder for me to be a little bit more interactive, like in my Discord, because I got so much going on, and I'm trying to do so many things and set up so many opportunities. But I just do my best to do what I can. My community is very understanding- they know I got a lot going on. But when I can, I link up with them and talk to them. I go all out, and I try to dedicate as much time to my community because if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be in the position that I am. So yeah, dedicate as much I try to dedicate as much time to my community as they dedicate to me.

LeeshCapeesh has seen her viewership increase significantly, which has now meant that she is less able to interact with individual viewers during her streams, as many messages come through each second that she is live. Instead, she engages with messages when she can, aiming to regularly interact with the chat, even if many messages are unable to be acknowledged. One way that LeeshCapeesh achieves this is through the use of an overlay to her stream which puts the messages of her chat on the screen of the broadcast, as well as in the chat box which accompanies all streams on Twitch. She uses this overlay for *Just Chatting* streams and when she is not playing a game. This results in the viewers’ attention being drawn to the chat messages, making the chat the focus of the stream. This allows for everyone’s messages to be shown on stream, and to be visible, allowing them to feel part of the conversation, and that LeeshCapeesh is spending “quality” time with them all (Jamieson, 2011: 2.3). For viewers watching with the chat box not open, such as those casting to a TV or on a mobile device, this ensures that they are also able to follow along with what is being said.

KaiJayne discusses how they view the process of building relationships with viewers as their channel has grown:

Eva: Do you have a different relationship with some of the people that have been there from the start?

KaiJayne: I would say so because, obviously, those people, I have actually been friends with and we made friends through the community and stuff like that, rather than people that just know me as a streamer... So, I feel like I do have a different relationship with those people. I feel like a lot of the time, when you're first starting off as a streamer you just want to make friends, you know, you want to make those interpersonal connections, because you can't just like start off streaming, like, with your head in the sky, like, ‘These are my fans’, rather than, like people that are in my community.

KaiJayne outlines a distinction between regular viewers who have become friends through the community due to having been watching them for a long time, and those who solely know them in the role of a streamer. This differentiation indicates a closer relationship with those who have been in KaiJayne's streams for a longer time, for whom they perceive to have a "*different relationship*", characterised by greater intimacy, noting that this is in part due to having a smaller number of viewers at the start and having undertaken affective labour to develop relationships and grow their community. Starting streaming and building an audience requires interaction with viewers and developing relationships so that viewers feel inclined to become regulars and return to watch each stream. Beginning streaming with the intention of treating all viewers like fans, from which KaiJayne implies a more distant relationship with less two-way communication, would limit the ability to form connections with viewers. When KaiJayne's channel was smaller, there was more time to engage with each viewer in the chat, having conversations as a small group, instead of one person talking to a much larger audience, for which the relationships are more asymmetrical and akin to understandings of parasociality. Thus, as KaiJayne's channel has grown, KaiJayne is less likely to be aware of every individual viewer and will have less knowledge about them, compared to the degree to which she knows the long-standing viewers.

Closeness and Friendship

From lurking on Twitch, it was very common to hear streamers refer to their viewers as their friends. It allows streamers to create a welcoming environment so that viewers feel encouraged to engage with the chat and the content of the stream. However, whilst streamers may have an affinity towards their viewers, the depth of the relationships they hold with them varies. Many streamers are able to cultivate a sense of closeness with their viewers, with some perceiving their viewers as more than just a passive audience but instead as friends. Alongside discussions of community, ideas of emotional closeness and friendship or in some cases, lack thereof, was present in every interview for this research. As we can see throughout this section, participants' views ranged significantly from seeing viewers as close friends, to holding them at more of a distance:

Riley: Oh my gosh, my chat! I love my community ... Some of them are some of my closest friends.

LeeshCapeesh: They're all friends in my head, some more than others, but they're all friends in my head ... like a tight knit community.

Robin: I see all my viewers as friends. They make me laugh and happy.

These responses indicate how these streamers feel able to connect with their viewers and feel close enough to consider them friends, demonstrating the possibility for intimacy, despite the physical distance and potential anonymity of viewers. Furthermore, the responses demonstrate that varying degrees of connection may exist among viewers, reflecting the complexity of these relationships. Riley, whilst expressing their affection for their broader community, specifically highlights that "*some of them*" are their "*closest friends*" and can identify a subset with whom they share a more intimate and closer connection. Similarly, LeeshCapeesh identifies a level of connection with her entire audience, but also introduces a degree of separation by saying "*some more than others*", recognising the varying levels of closeness to those within the community. This response is echoed within the literature as

Zinoviev and Duong (2009) argue that “online friendship is an umbrella name for real friendship and various degrees of acquaintanceship” (4). Robin does not share the same sentiment and states that she regards “all” her viewers as friends, without the need to draw exclusionary boundaries. Jamieson (2005) argues that “not all practices of intimacy create boundaries” (199) and that “some of the ways in which relationships become different and special are forms of institutionalisation that sidestep the need for more conscious boundary creation or active boundary maintenance” (200). One reason that Robin may not feel the need to intentionally implement exclusionary boundaries in the relationships she holds with her viewers is due to the ways in which they communicate, which takes place online. For streamers, the communication with their audience takes place primarily on Twitch, as well as other platforms such as Twitter and Discord, and offline contact is not considered the norm. In this bounded social space, streamers are able to assume a mutual sense of intimacy with their audience without confirmation of this mutuality, beyond the messages from the chat and also without necessarily discriminating between viewers as individual sources of feedback. By contrast, Riley and LeeshCapeesh recognise that some of their viewers are intimates whilst others are not (Jamieson, 2005) and draw upon their relationships outside of Twitch in their assessments of intimacy and when maintaining a more conscious sense of boundaries between themselves and the majority of their viewers.

Katt Kartel describes how she feels close to her moderators, who have been regulars in her stream for a long time and she can rely on them to support her with her broadcasts, but she notes that she no longer looks specifically for closeness with her viewers:

Katt Kartel: I feel, right now, my mods are close, like we're actually friends ... I feel like closeness takes way more time than just a couple of streams so now I don't look for 'close', I look for comfortable. Am I comfortable in my space with these people? And are they comfortable with me?

For Katt Kartel, closeness requires a significant investment of time, and cannot be rushed. Instead of seeking closeness with viewers as the aim, she works to create an environment in which they can feel welcome and comfortable so that they can become regulars and members of her community. However, despite not feeling like she is friends with her viewers, she notes that she has a close relationship with her moderators- a role which requires significant trust due to the responsibilities of assisting Katt with the running on her stream. The role of moderators is discussed in depth in the chapter on Boundaries (Chapter 6), including further analysis of how participants view the relationships with their moderators.

Jambo also discusses the limitations she places on the relationships with her viewers:

Jambo: I don't want to say that everyone in my community is my friend, because that's not how it works. But I do feel that there is a human connection between me and this chat. It's not numbers, and it's not just usernames, it's people connecting as people and that's so special in a space that is often very competitive and numbers centric ... I feel at home... and that's what I hope other people feel too.

For Jambo, the relationships she has with her viewers are of great value as they have worked together to build a community where people can socialise and interact with one another. Jambo is clear that although not all viewers are going to be her friends, their presence goes beyond just data on a screen, as there are real people engaging at the other end of the computer or device. She also notes that they have created a space in which she can “feel at

home” indicating that despite not viewing all viewers as friends, Jambo is still comfortable in their company, in a way that implies intimacy through a sense of belonging (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019b).

Like Jambo, Radderss also does not view all her viewers as friends and describes the boundaries she holds in differentiating between her personal relationships:

Radderss: It's not a best friend kind of thing and I don't think it's fair to people to be like, 'You're my best friend' ... but they're like a little internet family. Not like your immediate family, just like your wider family. We can come and go and have our own things going on in our own lives but when we come together, we have things to share. Sometimes people can't watch for months or even years- I've had viewers who have disappeared for however long amount of time because they have things going on in their lives. Whether they were in the army and they were deployed, or they went to school for a couple years and they didn't go on Twitch for those years, or because they had so much to work and study and things. And then they come back, and we chat. And it's great to catch up.

Radderss’ response indicates that the relationship she has with her viewers is not like that of a close friend, instead comparing it more to that of distant family members, in which disclosure is much more limited than it would be with close family or friends. In this relationship, Radderss is able to share more personal information, such as that about her health and wellbeing, contributing towards the development of intimacy with her viewers (de Wit et al., 2020) but reserves disclosing more personal information to close friends outwith her stream, indicating the internal boundary she holds in her relationship with views. However, the relationships built with viewers from having spent time together, sharing experiences, and from participating in the community, allow for viewers who have become known to Radderss to be able to leave the stream for periods of time and then return, knowing that they are able to jump back into the community, and be recognised due to their prior involvement. Both Jambo and Radderss have two of the largest followings in the sample for this research, with over 16,000 and 29,000 respectively. Having so many followers and lots of messages being posted in the chat is likely to impact the closeness that they can feel with viewers, as their attention is divided between so many individuals. This idea is further reflected in a response by Arthremis:

Arthremis: When you're a much smaller streamer, and you're doing it as a hobby, you may see all the people that come and interact with you as your friends. And there are a number of them from that time and from when I worked in the games industry, that are friends that come into my chat and so we have a very friendly chatting relationship. I always try and keep a friendly rapport with everyone else that comes in. But if you do not set a boundary at the time that people start trying to take your time, they will start going as though we are friends. So, I actually do try not to use the word 'friends' on my stream, which feels a little cold and a little callous, but I'm trying to be an entertainer ... I can't be everyone's best friend, because I don't have that much of myself to give away- you can't pour from an empty cup.

Arthremis discusses her understanding of the closeness and friendship she has with viewers, acknowledging that the growth of her channel has changed the way that she interacts with them. When she was a smaller streamer, Arthremis perceived the people who interacted with her as friends, which was made simpler due to the significantly smaller following she had on

the platform, which afforded back and forth conversation individuals in the chat on a regular basis, with more time to devote to each viewer. However, as her channel has grown, Arthemis has recognised the need to set exclusionary boundaries to prevent viewers from overstepping and assuming a friendship that may not exist, and to protect her more intimate friendships. Such boundaries are exemplified by her refraining from using the term “*friends*” to describe her relationships with viewers, and she describes her role as more akin to “*the friendly person you would meet at a party*”, as someone who fosters conversations but without expectations of close friendship. Like BoopCreate discussed earlier in the chapter, Arthemis also seems to feel a sense of responsibility not to misrepresent the relationship and the limitations on it, so that her viewers understand they are not the same as relationships ‘in real life’. Instead, she sees her role as that of an “*entertainer*”, distinct and separate from the viewers, particularly as this is her job, which requires professional boundaries.

Co-Presence

As a platform that might initially seem like a one-way direction of communication from streamers to their viewers, closer analysis shows how streamers build relationships with their viewers, utilising the chat alongside the stream to engage with viewers’ comments. As discussed in the Literature Review, (Chapter 1) this thesis takes the position that ‘co-presence’ is understood as sharing space together, which can be online, whilst also mutually available for communication with one another (Zhao and Elesh, 2008). For streamers, this involves both the streamer and viewers being in the same online location, which is primarily Twitch, but could be other platforms including Discord, and also in this location with the intention of communicating with one another, marked by immediacy utilising synchronous communication technology. This definition highlights how simply being online on the same platform does not equate to co-presence, this would instead be co-location, as co-presence requires the mutual desire to communicate (May, 2002: 89).

For Bex_Bomb, sharing time and space together, despite physical distance, is key to building a close connection with viewers:

Bex_Bomb: I really liked streaming when getting up in the morning. So, I’d do my makeup, have a coffee, breakfast, whatever, just for a couple hours before work. I did that quite a few times, again, during the pandemic because I could because I was working from home. And so that was quite nice, sharing those sorts of moments.

Bex_Bomb describes livestreaming her mornings, offering her viewers a glimpse “backstage” (Goffman: 1959) of a part of their lives that the public would not typically get to see. Getting ready in the morning is time typically spent alone and in private and in these streams, closeness is communicated to the viewers through their intimate access to her private domestic space- as if the viewer is so close to the streamer that they would naturally be there in those moments, like family members or close friends. However, sharing these moments and the privileged knowledge (Jamieson, 2011) gained from such intentional disclosure of intimate space, does not indicate full disclosure of every aspect of the streamer’s life or necessarily that the private realms of the streamer are becoming fully public. Instead, these streams are timed and pre-planned to show selected aspects of their day in order to induce feelings of intimacy and connection and imply emotional accessibility.

SaraBelle also discusses the importance of the sharing time together, stressing the value in the immediacy of the communication with viewers, and the disconnect that arises from even the smallest delay in the stream:

SaraBelle: I've found that the best way to engage is to literally stay on top of chat, and as soon as the message comes in, interact with it. And if there is a lag, let's say I drop a few frames, all of a sudden there is a lag between when the viewers hear what I'm saying... it is a conversation, and you need to stay on top of it...It's so frustrating to me. My sister, who is not a streamer, every once in a while, will stream something, whatever it is, and it takes her minutes to see a message- it bothers me so much! I'm like, 'Pay attention to my message! Talk to me!' So, for me, that's like a huge, huge thing, being on top of chat and constantly interacting with their messages.

SaraBelle shares her thoughts on the importance of responding instantly to messages, offering her perspective as both a streamer and as a viewer. As described by Woodcock and Johnson (2019b), “Twitch streamers are expected to respond quickly to comments in chat and to in-game developments, to be emotional, to vary how they act according to game context, viewers, and time of day—and to modulate their performance for both current and potential viewers” (816). This expectation places additional emotional and affective labour on streamers, requiring them to maintain a constant, high level of engagement and adaptability, which can be particularly demanding and reflects broader pressure on streamers to be perpetually available and emotionally responsive.

SaraBelle’s response also indicates how valued the immediacy of communication is for building a connection with viewers and also how there are clear expectations of how quickly streamers should read and interact with messages in the chat. This reflects the work of Jamieson (2011) who states that “intimacy built through spending time together” can also require this time to be “on demand” (2.3). Instantaneous responses also help to convey feelings of co-presence, through knowing you are communicating with a human, mediated by technology, mimicking in-person communication. Although many streamers intentionally set stream-delays (such as to protect themselves from stream sniping¹⁴, or during competitive streams in which messages from the chat might have negative consequences), during *Just Chatting* streams, or streams with a smaller audience, a delay creates unnecessary distance between streamer and the viewers, breaking the connection and responsiveness of the chat.

For Erin, the closeness she feels with her viewers is strengthened through their connections over other social media, in particular Discord:

Erin: A lot of the first people to show up during my 'Stream Starting Soon' screen are the people in Discord who are talking to me constantly. So, it's like, 'Hey, I was talking to you earlier. How are you feeling?' ... I typically do feel really close to the people there because I stay connected with them all the time. I didn't know the value of Discord until probably a couple months ago. That has been a game changer. Because you don't have to just follow me on Twitter, if you don't have social media,

¹⁴ ‘Stream sniping’ refers to the practice of viewers taking advantage of the stream as a way of finding and harassing the player during online multiplayer games. For example, in the third-person shooter game Fortnite, if a streamer is playing live, a viewer can see the streamer’s location, which provides useful in-game knowledge which puts the streamer at a disadvantage.

just come join the community. And you can see what we're talking about and if you want to talk to me, come talk here ... I think what contributes to the closeness is that people really do join the Discord and then come back to the stream because they like what they see off-stream. They just want to come hang out with me because we're the people that they're hanging out with in the Discord.

Erin discusses how being connected to her viewers across social media allows them to always be able to contact her and stay in touch, even when she is not streaming. This accessibility to Erin, and mutual interest in communication builds intimacy, as streamers often use Discord and Twitter to give their followers the first to know about changes to streaming schedules, giveaways, intended gameplay, as well offering day-to-day conversation- also noted by Youngblood (2022) who states, “viewers are actively encouraged to stay habitually and extensively linked via multiple methods” (535). This ongoing interaction through Discord allows for exchanges that go beyond what is often possible in the Twitch chat, enabling the building of deeper connections. Erin emphasises how she feels a greater sense of closeness to these individuals because of the constant communication she maintains with them. Additionally, viewers may feel more involved in the community as they are first to access information about the streamer, gaining “privileged knowledge” (Jamieson, 2011: 2.2) and are likely to engage with other viewers in the server, so that their username may be recognised more often. The use of Discord also gives greater exposure to the streamer, and extends the time spent together, even when the streamer is away from Twitch. Erin also notes how through building relationships with Twitch viewers on Discord, users are more inclined to become return and regular viewers, emphasising the importance of platforms such as Discord in facilitating further interactions and for creating a sense of community that develops the intimacy between the streamer and viewers. As such, this ability to communicate with streamers, even when they are offline from Twitch, contributes to a sense of co-presence, from sharing digital space and through the shared intention to communicate with each other. However, the ability to contact each other outside of streaming hours, and the increasing number of platforms on which to communicate, may also lead to expectations to always be available, which Melissa Gregg (2011) refers to as a “presence bleed”. This constant connection and access to the streamer blurs the time between work as a streamer and home life, away from Twitch as the streamer must be “always on” (Marwick, 2016: 343). As such, despite the benefits of such connectivity, streamers must ensure that they are maintaining time away from the work of streaming and its related communication to avoid burn-out. The importance of work and life separation is discussed further in the chapters on Labour and Boundaries (Chapters 4 and 6 respectively). For the viewers, this access to stream times provides them with the opportunity to change their viewership plans according to the schedule, as unlike traditional media, many streamers do not have a set schedule and even for those that do, this can be subject to changes.

Disclosure, Support and Care

Another way that intimacy can develop between streamers and their viewers is through the mutual provision of support and care for each other. By disclosing experiences and engaging with other users, viewers on Twitch are able to learn from those who may have gone through something similar, or at least know that people are engaging with what they are going through and are sending support from wherever they are in the world (de Wit et al., 2020). Streamers can verbally share personal aspects of their lives to their viewers, who are able to respond immediately in written form in the chat. Viewers can provide comfort to streamers

by identifying with their problems, sharing solutions, and even just through their virtual presence, listening to the streamer's experiences. From sharing information about their own lives in the chat, viewers' responses may be seen and responded to by the streamer or by other viewers. As argued by Derlega and Grzelak (1979), "self-disclosure may act as a vehicle for developing close relationships" as "one person's disclosure tends to elicit self-disclosure from another...and help meet the other partner's emotional needs, and this process provides positive outcomes in the relationship" (154). Thus, self-disclosure is a practice that can build the intimacy between a streamer and their viewers as they learn more about each other and identify shared experiences. However, the line of communication between streamers and viewers is not always two-way, as noted by research participant Robin who said, "*I feel like they know me, and I know them to a certain point because I am the only one with the mic turned on*". Although all viewers will be able to listen to the experiences of the streamer, the viewer's message may not be seen or acknowledged by the streamer, either because the streamer does not want to engage or because they have missed the message (Wohn and Freeman, 2020). For streamers with larger followings this can often be the case, as they can receive multiple messages in the chat each second, with the chat auto-scrolling on the screen as more messages come through. Although streamers may not always respond to messages sharing experiences in the chat, other viewers often communicate with each other, forming a conversation that does not require participation from the streamer.

Providing support and care despite significant distance and being entirely digitally mediated forgoes all the physical elements of showing care. For streamers or viewers that are ill or tired, responses cannot involve providing practical care such as preparing them food, or even giving them a hug. Instead, streamers and viewers provide verbal and written support to each other, in a way that is intangible in a physical sense, but still enacted with the intention of building and maintaining a connection to others. These acts are also achieved whilst cooperating with predetermined boundaries on what to share, as well as audience size, as having a large number of viewers or a small number will impact how messages are received and what people feel comfortable sharing. For the viewers, all messages are sent under a username which is often not linked to the individual's real name or identifiable information. However, even with anonymity, disclosing personal information to a large group of people could be a daunting experience, as you cannot guarantee how others will respond.

Much of the support and care that takes place during streams takes the form of everyday discussion of issues in the lives of the streamers and the viewers and could be viewed taking place regularly in the streams I observed. For example, Bex_Bomb has Nightbot, a chat bot that provides moderation and automated messages, to greet people joining the stream with the following message: "*Psst hope you're having a great day! If you're not, that's ok too just remember you're strong, amazing, and worthy of happiness.*" This message from Nightbot was created by Bex_Bomb to set the tone for her streams and new people joining so that they feel welcome and supported by not only her but her community too. Another example is from observing BoopCreate's stream in which she provided support to one of her viewers whilst playing the game *Persona 5*. BoopCreate was discussing how she was doing an internship which affected her time and ability to stream regularly, but assured viewers that she was scheduling some longer streams in the near future. As she discussed this, a VIP subscriber messaged the chat:

- "*How have you been, I missed you*"
- "*I've been working 80-hour weeks so that's been fun LUL*"

BoopCreate sees this message and responds verbally to the subscriber exclaiming, “80-hour weeks? I work a small portion of that and it’s a lot.” Without a pause, BoopCreate then goes back to the game, reading aloud the on-screen dialogue text in the turn-based role-playing game. As she plays through the game for the next several minutes, other viewers in the chat provide support to the viewer working 80-hour weeks, with one posting, “Jesus! That sounds brutal”.

The viewer posts again stating they have “Been making money but no sleep and no time for friends”. BoopCreate reads this message out-loud, adding, “That sucks”. The chat then moves towards not having enough time to eat, to which BoopCreate describes her own issue about making time to eat when she is busy:

“I’m the exact same way: I get busy, and I forget to eat. And it messes me up... I mean if I don’t eat as much for a couple of days then it messes up my appetite.”

To this, other users discuss the importance of finding time to eat and the negative effects when they miss meals, in order to connect with the first user. Meanwhile, BoopCreate turns her focus back to the gameplay, leaving her viewers to continue the conversation amongst themselves. This example demonstrates the everyday support that streaming communities provide for each other, offering reciprocal support in response to self-disclosures. Although BoopCreate’s focus remained primarily on the gameplay, she still took time to briefly engage with messages from her viewers to relate to the experiences, show sympathy for her viewer, and then step back as other viewers step in to offer support to the viewer.

‘Spoon theory’ is an analogy developed by Christine Miserandino (2003) for people with chronic illnesses to explain their energy levels for any given day. With a set number of spoons each day, actions can deplete (such as physical movement or work) or add spoons (such as sleep or eating). As a self-declared ‘spoonie’, Erin’s viewers are involved in her wellness and are able to check-in on how she is doing throughout the stream:

Erin: We do the spoon checks on screen. I have my little game capture that has spoons on it, and we will do spoon checks. I start every stream with 10 spoons and people can use their channel points to redeem spoon checks to make me think about where I am with my energy levels. And then I might delete a couple spoons or maybe I won’t, maybe I’m like, ‘No, I’m good, I’m feeling good today’. It’s become a thing where if I’ve been spoon checked all day, and I’m down to one spoon, somebody who is a part of my community might come in and go, ‘Hey, are you doing okay? You have one spoon?’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, it’s just we’re getting toward the end, and I’m tired’. And I adore that people have this visual way to say, ‘Wow, oh, wow, your energy is low. How are you?’ Just that physical spoon on my screen is enough to motivate somebody to ask me if I’m okay and that’s a beautiful thing. And so, the community puts exactly zero pressure on me, they are always like, ‘You do a lot’. People have messaged me ‘I know you’re in pain today and I watched you and you did great’. And that’s just life with autoimmune diseases.

Erin utilises the features of Twitch to allow her viewers to check her energy levels. By having a visual representation of her energy and wellness, which discloses her current state of wellbeing, Erin allows her community to feel personally involved in ensuring that she is at a good energy level and is taking the appropriate measures to keep feeling well. Through Erin’s

disclosures when her spoons are low, someone in Erin's community will step in to remind her to check-in with her and provide her with support. This provides a level of intimacy to their relationship, as viewers are providing care for Erin and showing her that they are invested in her health. Although Erin's self-disclosure about her health to her viewers may contribute to viewers' parasocial interactions with her (Kim and Song, 2016), her response also exemplifies the argument of Guarriello (2019) who states that "relational building is obviously bound up in neoliberal modes of work, but through being attentive, grateful, and friendly along with being transparent... there are long-lasting, sustained forms of income and emotional support" (1766). Thus, for Erin, having taken on affective labour to engage with her viewers and grow her channel, and through her openness regarding her health, she now has viewers that offer her financial support and show care.

Whilst some streamers take on the role of both receiving and giving support to viewers in the chat, Laura Cress acknowledges the limitations of this form of care:

Laura Cress: Even though someone is in your chat all the time, you actually don't really know that much about them and what's going on. So, there have been times when people have said things in the Discord and I've been a bit like, "Oh, I hope you're alright", because ... I'm just a general person. I can't really help if you're having issues!

Laura Cress has found that as people join her streams more often and transition from first-time viewers or 'randoms' and become 'regulars' they feel more inclined to share their personal anecdotes in the chat and on her Discord channel, where viewers can continue their conversations when she is off stream. However, Laura finds that this can put her in a challenging situation in that she is not fully equipped to offer help or advice given that she does not truly know the people offline and the entire situation. With the overwhelming majority of relationships between streamers and viewers taking place entirely online, those involved are not necessarily privy to the entirety of knowledge about each person, meaning that providing specific advice and support is not always wise or even possible. Laura's response also indicates how viewers may feel like they know streamers on a deeper level that may not be fully reciprocated and could feel inclined to share very personal information about their lives, feeling that the streamer is a close friend due to the amount of time spent watching the streamer, indicating a parasocial relationship (Leith, 2021).

Whilst other participants have built a closer relationship to their viewers from the mutual self-disclosure of personal information and anecdotes, Alice experienced a lack of engagement with her disclosure that left her feeling "weird" about the experience of sharing:

Alice: Right before I was going to start a stream ... my cousin called me and told me that my grandpa had died. I was actually already live- I just had the starting screen there; nobody could see my face yet ... And for whatever reason, I went ahead and went live anyway and just let people know that if I was kinda down and sad that it was because of that ... It was a little dumb. I probably should have given myself more time to process that before going live. Because in that moment, I didn't quite register it yet ... I felt like it would just be easier for me to get the stream over with, and then maybe take my time afterwards ... It was very weird because people came in, and I started the stream, and then I mentioned that I'm feeling a bit different today, a bit down, and I might end the stream early. And nobody reacted in chat ... I felt like I was putting myself out there and saying to my viewers, 'Hey, I'm still here, even though I'm really

not feeling well. And let's just have a fun time' ... But nobody wrote anything in chat and not getting that feedback was just weird.

Alice's response demonstrates a lack of engagement with her disclosure that left her feeling negatively about sharing with her viewers. She describes how the decision to go ahead with her stream this was not a good idea given her emotional state at that moment, but also notes how she had already started her stream, which indicates that there may have been a degree of pressure to her continuing to stream, given that viewers would have been notified of her going live and would be waiting for her to start. However, their lack of response when she shared her sad news demonstrates how this relationship can be one-sided, leading to insecurity for Alice in how she perceives the relationship she has with her viewers and underscores the importance of communication and feedback in fostering a truly reciprocal and intimate relationship.. Alice also indicates that she expected a greater degree of emotional intimacy with her viewers than she received, and thus,, whilst disclosure can lead to support and feelings of closeness to others, it can also lead to feelings of rejection when the disclosure is not met with adequate feedback, reciprocal disclosure (Derlega, 1984), or "care when it is exceptionally needed", which "undermines other practices of intimacy" (Jamieson, 2011: 2.4).

On Twitch, responses and data collected from observation have indicated how the provision of support and care forms an important practice in building intimacy in the relationships between streamers and their viewers. Whilst previous research from de Wit et al. (2020) focused on how Twitch supports viewers, with specific attention given to mental health, this section has illustrated the importance of everyday acts of care. These small gestures, prompt responses to chat, expressions of empathy, checking in on streamers' health, forge meaningful connections and build a sense of belonging among viewers. By contrast, responses from Laura Cress and Alice indicate that when more serious disclosures are made, viewers and streamers may not always reciprocate as desired which can limit or can negatively impact the development of intimacy.

In-person Contact

Although not typically a significant part of the relationship between streamers and their viewers, two participants did discuss their thoughts of meeting up offline, or 'in real life'. Streamers have viewers from all over the world meaning that little emphasis is put on in-person meetings given impracticalities as well as safety concerns. As such, this form of contact is not something that all streamers are interested in, and for some would represent a significant undertaking to ensure that the event runs smoothly and that both themselves and the attendees are safe. Thus, in-person meet-ups are often limited to smaller streamers, with a manageable and more intimate relationship with their viewers, or, for those with larger followings who have access to the support and planning necessary to hold a bigger event.

None of the participants discussed any experience with organising in-person events with viewers. However, Bex_Bomb did mention interacting with her viewers when she has met them at events saying, "I always *buy them a drink whenever I can meet them IRL. I've met a couple of them at events and things like that*". For Bex_Bomb, this contact was a welcome opportunity to meet up with trusted moderators who have contributed towards running her stream, but other than chance encounters, she does not organise in-person events with viewers.

Laura Cress also discussed her thoughts on meeting up with viewers- something that at the time of the interview she had not yet done but was considering:

Laura Cress: If there were quite a few then I'd definitely go meet-up- probably with a couple people and I'd go and say hi. It's kind of weird, because obviously a few of them, I don't even know what they look like really, which just feels sort of weird. But it's one of those things. I guess that's sort of how it works ... I would say a lot of them are friends, I see them as people I would hopefully get along with. But even though you see people in chat, you don't really know exactly what they're like as a person. So, I'd be up for maybe meeting at a group, but I think I'd probably keep it at that.

For Laura Cress, who has a following of 1000 people, in-person contact is not something that she has actively sought out or has ruled out. An opportunity to meet offline would allow her to know her viewers more personally through getting to see what they look like alongside being able to talk to them face-to-face, providing a fuller picture of the people with whom she regularly communicates with online. However, meeting up with individuals when you have never seen their faces before is an intimidating prospect which indicates that there is a limit to the closeness that Laura feels with viewers, without being able to see them. Both Laura and Bex_Bomb indicate that their primary mode of interaction with viewers remains digital. Although building offline connections with viewers may hold some appeal, particularly with trusted moderators, the practicalities and potential risks associated with meeting strangers offline often outweigh the perceived benefits in the relationships between streamers and their viewers.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the intimate practices involved in building relationships between women and non-binary streamers with their viewers, highlighting the ways in which feelings of closeness are generated on the platform. The first sections explored parasocial relationships, and how streamers view relationships as having limitations, drawing attention to the ways in which streaming lends itself to parasociality and the complexities that follow when building relationships on Twitch. The subsequent sections outlined the role of a community on Twitch, and regular viewership, which are vital elements to the development of intimacy on the platform, also drawing attention to the implementation of exclusionary boundaries in these relationships. These sections aim to outline how individuals are brought together by shared interests and identities, allowing them to find a welcoming environment that they can be part of. For those that become regulars, streamers are often able to get to know them on a deeper level, however, changes in viewership, such as gaining a lot of new viewers, can impact the ability to connect on the platform. Closeness and friendship was next discussed in this chapter, with participants describing the ways in which they view their relationships with viewers, with some feeling like they are close friends and family, whilst others hold their viewers at more of a distance. This section highlighted how streamers viewed the relationships with viewers, drawing attention to the varying degrees of closeness and the use of exclusionary boundaries. This chapter then illustrated the ways in which co-presence can be generated on Twitch, discussing the importance of liveness, spending time together, and cross-platform communication with viewers in order to bring a sense of togetherness, despite physical distance. The subsequent section outlined how streamers and viewers can offer support and provide care for each other, and the role of self-disclosure in

building intimacy, demonstrating the importance of small, everyday acts of care to build the relationships. Although such support is intangible, it aims to build connection through offering empathy and engagement with the experiences, shedding light on the ways in which support and care can be given in this live, digital setting. This section also noted the challenges that come when disclosures are not met with reciprocity (Jamieson, 2011: 2.4). Lastly this chapter briefly examines participants' experiences of in-person communication with viewers, which forms a very small part of these relationships and one that was not considered by most participants. Overall, this chapter has provided novel insights into the practices that build intimacy on Twitch by expanding the work of Jamieson (2011) to explore how women and non-binary streamers cultivate communities and foster friendships on the platform, highlighting how these practices are achieved in this live and digital setting.

Chapter 6: Building and Maintaining Boundaries on Twitch

Introduction

As I have aimed to illustrate throughout this thesis, Twitch, as the most popular streaming platform for gamers and creative artists, has created a space for individuals to showcase their skills; build communities; and for some, earn a living. However, despite the importance of Twitch as an environment which affords the ability to grow communities and friendships, Twitch can also be a challenging place for streamers, especially for marginalised groups such as women and non-binary streamers, who often face harassment and abuse from other users. The result of such harassment and abuse requires streamers to form firm boundaries and undertake proactive measures to protect themselves and their communities. This chapter will explore the experiences of streamers and the abuse they have witnessed and faced, alongside analysis of the ways in which they develop boundaries. The first section of this chapter focuses on trolling and abuse. In the colloquial sense, trolls use offensive language to harass streamers, often engaging in racist, sexist, and transphobic attacks, targeting individual identities. This section aims to illustrate the harmful behaviour, which is often present on Twitch, and how streamers respond through the implementation of boundaries. The second section of this chapter then analyses the role of moderators, who are selected by streamers to monitor messages in the chat, removing harmful and unwanted content. Moderators form a key part of the boundaries of streamers, working to enforce the rules that they set for the chat, and removing abusive and unwanted content. They also offer support to streamers, such as during hate raids, or from bots. The third section of this chapter covers boundary setting through self-censorship, as streamers withhold information from their viewers. This section examines what information participants viewed to be kept private such as when it includes health information, references family, or could impact their safety. Finally, this chapter addresses participants' criticisms of Twitch, offering key insight to site failures and identifying new approaches for managing the safety of its user base. Throughout this chapter, I will illustrate how these boundaries are negotiated and maintained, particularly through the emotional and affective labour undertaken by streamers, and the role they play in shaping the dynamics between streamers and their viewers, offering protection to the relationships that are formed on the platform.

A Note on Trolls and Trolling

Much of the negative behaviour on Twitch, but also online more generally, is frequently referred to as 'trolling'. A 'troll' is defined by Hardaker (2010) as someone "who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement" (237). For instance, a quick search of 'troll' will generate countless articles about celebrities' interactions with trolls, referring to the abuse received across social media platforms (BBC News, 2019; Lomas, 2021). Trolling has also seen political attention with a 2019 Rapid Evidence Assessment from the UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport stating that "trolling can be used to create disruption and discord, to provoke a response from individuals or groups of users, or as a silencing tool to discourage other internet users from getting involved with additional online discussion". Thus, trolling is frequently understood as any negative and anti-social online behaviour, from "sophomoric pranks to identity-based

harassment to online impersonation to political activism to straightforward racism and misogyny” (Phillips, 2014: 7). Although Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) argue that “Using the expression ‘trolling’ imprecisely, as an umbrella term for various different online misbehaviours or as a synonym for similar, but different behaviours, poses a problem for the effective tackling of these behaviours” (7), this research uses understandings of trolling generated from the participants themselves, who use the term much more broadly to describe negative interactions with their chat. Whilst I recognise the concerns around diluting the term and that its usage within this chapter may not fully align with various definitions of trolling, through participant-generated definitions, I aim to reflect their understandings of the online harms and identify the ways they navigate Twitch with this behaviour in mind.

Facing Abuse and Unwanted Behaviour on Twitch

In order to understand the different boundaries that are implemented and maintained, it is first important to consider the background upon which such boundaries are necessary. This section will examine the experiences of women and non-binary streamers, which participants frequently refer to as ‘trolling’. For participants, ‘trolling’ tended to focus on the intent of the viewer and could refer to any form of behaviour that causes disruption to their stream, from spam to disagreements about LGBTQIA+ rights and gender equality, with the intent to offend. Trolling is particularly pertinent topic for participants as it often involves “misogynistic, racist, homophobic, ableist, and violent hate speech targeted at marked bodies online (including those who identify as women, people of color, LGBTQ, disabled, religious minorities, or other non-normative identities” (Clinnin and Manthey, 2019: 31). However, for such “marked bodies”, their presence online “attracts hate speech for the audacity to exist online in ways that do not adhere to hegemonic understandings of identities and bodies” (Clinnin and Manthey, 2019: 31). This section aims to provide a brief insight into some of the abuse that participants have faced on the platform however further discussion on targeted harassment based upon marginalised characteristics can be found in the chapter on Gender (Chapter 3).

When it comes to managing trolls and negative interactions in the chat, BonnieSansClyde offers a particularly humanising perspective:

BonnieSansClyde: I'm able to brush it off. I mean, most of the time they go for like my appearance, or like the fact that my voice is a little deeper and I'm already perfectly aware of that, so you can't really hit me with anything that I haven't heard before... I've tried engaging the trolls. Like those more high-energy drama streamers do and ... it makes me feel bad. Because, at the same time, yeah, they're attacking me, but I don't know what they're going through- I don't know why they're doing what they're doing. They're still a person. So, it's rude to clap back at them. I aggressively just ban them and move on ... They probably want a reaction. I know that a lot of a lot of trolls do it for that, especially because of that culture of calling them out and using them for content.

Bonnie’s description of how she brushes off abusive comments about her appearance and voice highlights emotional labour that some streamers are expected to endure, as she not only ignores the misogynistic comments made by the troll, refusing to react, but also shows them empathy, considering how “they’re still a person”. At the same time, Bonnie notes that trolls are lashing out for attention and that reacting or arguing with them would be giving them

what they want. BonnieSansClyde discusses how a lot of creators like to argue back with the trolls, make an example out of them or mock them, which has become a commonplace practice amongst many streamers. However, such behaviour could potentially attract more trolls to her stream with the expectation that she would be able to clap-back to each comment in an entertaining way.

Whilst BonnieSansClyde manages trolls through an immediate ban, FunnyLilSpoonie has learned that she needs to take a firm approach to hateful comments, describing one experience with a troll:

FunnyLilSpoonie: They came in and they said horrible things and they used the F-word a lot. And then right before I blocked them, because I was trying to give them a chance, they called me a fat whore and I was like, 'Okay, now you're being blocked'.

On Twitch, like on other social media, much of the trolling takes the form of disruptive behaviour (Hardaker, 2010) that seeks to detract from the stream. As stated by Phillips (2015) “That is, in fact, the entire exercise: to disrupt and upset as many people as possible, using whatever linguistic or behavioral tools are available” (2). FunnyLilSpoonie shows how she tried to give the troll an opportunity to engage in the chat in a more positive way, but they immediately crossed a line by being abusive towards her. Like BonnieSansClyde, FunnyLilSpoonie did not seek to argue with the troll and showed kindness in managing them, however, this was ultimately not respected by the troll and so they were blocked. The troll’s comments in both examples sought to distract the streamers from their broadcast, but it is also of note how the troll resorted to crude misogynistic comments, utilising the “linguistic and behavioural tools” at their disposal (Phillips, 2015: 2). Such comments are also indicative of what Megarry (2014), writing on trolls, describes as a “preoccupation with physical appearance” that suggests “that a woman’s worth and value lies in her sexual appeal to men” (50).

Another way in which streamers can face abuse on Twitch is from raids. Raids refer to when another streamer finishes streaming, and automatically directs their viewers to another stream. The viewers can then choose to stay or to leave the new stream. Whilst raids can be a very effective way of reaching new viewers and growing a Twitch channel, they can also be used to draw attention to a streamer, particularly a marginalised creator, for what are known as ‘hate raids’. For a hate raid, streamers send their viewers to the stream of another creator, with the intent of provoking their viewers into harassing the other streamer. Hate raids are often achieved using the tags that streamers attach to their stream, particularly when they refer to an element of their identity such as ‘LGBTQIA+’, ‘Black’ and ‘Trans’. Research from Han et al. (2023) found that “attackers may have leveraged these tags to discover and attack marginalized-identity streamers”, most notably those using ‘Black’, ‘African American’, and ‘LGBTQIA’ tags (2). KaiJayne discusses an experience in which a streamer with more followers directed a hate raid towards them:

KaiJayne: I did get early raids in my Twitch career that I would say were really, really upsetting... I don't know if it was because I am a non-binary person, or because it was a cam stream... it very much felt like it was targeted. There were a lot of LGBTQ slurs that were being thrown and a bunch of transphobic slurs being thrown, even Asian slurs being thrown ... I feel like everyone has to go through one of those at one point or another.

KaiJayne highlights how what is typically seen as a positive experience for streamers through getting raided, became negative due to the intent of the new viewers, who sought to harass them using transphobic and racist language to intimidate a new streamer. The frequency of such raids is also reflected in KaiJayne's comment, "I feel like everyone has to go through one of those at one point or another", noting how commonplace this behaviour is on Twitch. However, despite this being a difficult event for KaiJayne, their community were experienced in having witnessed such raids previously, and were able to help KaiJane navigate this unfamiliar ground:

KaiJayne: My community was like, 'Get these people out of here! It's okay! Switch to face cam. Don't show them what's going on' ... I was very much in shock when it happened, just because it was probably my sixth or seventh stream on Twitch. So, I was very taken aback... One of my community members helped me look through the user list that was like watching my stream at the time and track these people down and get them banned and reported to Twitch so it was taken care of.

KaiJayne talks about how their community rallied around them to protect them from abusive viewers following the hate raid, telling them to switch the stream to their face-cam to avoid showing the messages appearing from users targeting them. Although KaiJayne was not new to Twitch, as they had worked as a moderator for another streamer, this was the first time that they had experienced a hate raid as a streamer, and as such, they relied upon the advice of their community, including how to block the list of viewers that had come from the other stream. For a newcomer, these events can be particularly frightening to deal with and may deter users from continuing to stream on the platform, with attackers showing an "eagerness to cause widely-visible, attention-grabbing chaos" (Han et al., 2023: 16), and new streamers being an easy target. Such behaviour contributes to a culture on Twitch in which those who deviate from the default cisgender, white, heterosexual male are subject to scrutiny and abuse- a theme that is discussed in depth in the Gender chapter (Chapter 3). Moreover, this example demonstrates the role of streamers in curating a supportive environment, and the responsibility that comes with the influence they have over their viewers.

Whilst much of the undesirable behaviour on Twitch takes the form of direct abusive language, other forms can be much more insidious. AmberToTheCore discusses one experience in which viewer started to push her boundaries:

AmberToTheCore: In September there's something called Subtember so, what would happen is you would get a certain number of subs, and then you would do a special stream of some kind. What I liked to do pre-COVID was to do cosplay. So, I was like, 'I'll do a stream and do cosplay'. But it became so popular with this one guy in particular- I would just get loads of subs- that every time I'd stream, I'd be in cosplay, which got a little bit annoying, because I don't have that many costumes... I found that a little bit intrusive because he's seeing this as a control thing, and it became more of a slog rather than something fun.

This response from AmberToTheCore highlights the unexpected consequences that can arise regarding boundaries, particularly when it affects the control over women's bodies. AmberToTheCore discusses her experiences during Subtember, where she planned to do cosplay streams as a special event, as she had enjoyed doing cosplay prior to the pandemic. However, the popularity of her cosplay streams, driven by one particular viewer, became overwhelming and intrusive and as such, AmberToTheCore's felt that her cosplay, while

intended to engage and interact with the audience, was taken as an opportunity for control by an entitled male viewer, overshadowing her intention to create an entertaining show for her audience. This example also demonstrates the ways in which parasociality as a concept is not able to fully encompass boundary pushing in the form of attempted control over women's bodies, as well as the financial power dynamics involved in streaming, with one highly invested viewer able to utilise excessive influence.

The Role of Moderators

In the face of abuse from viewers on Twitch, moderators, or 'mods', play a vital role during broadcasts by defending the chat against abusive and disruptive behaviour, forming what participant Jessie describes as "*the protectors of the community*", and Jessica Price refers to as the "*first line of defence*" for streamers. Moderators can be granted privileges in the chat such as the ability to ban or time-out users and delete messages so that the content in the chat stays in line with the streamer's wishes. The content that can be banned in one chat may not be the same in another, so moderators refer to rules set by the streamer. The role of moderator tends to be a volunteer position, with only some moderators for highly successful channels receiving any form of compensation. As such, moderators can be subjected to a wide range of issues that they must take action on, from spam, to targeted abuse, at times "risking personal safety and wellness for the social good" (Doso and Semaan, 2019: 142). Furthermore, as noted by Wohn (2019), "because the human moderators are often volunteers, this adds a layer of interpersonal relationship management between streamer and moderator where the boundaries between emotional labor and fun are intertwined" (12). Thus, in addition to maintaining order in the chat, moderators also serve as an important resource to help meet the needs of the streamer and viewers, by developing a close relationship with the streamer through the ability to directly message them, access to their contact information (such as a private Discord chat), whilst working within the framework of guidelines established by the streamer to ensure community standards are met. Therefore, when a situation arises, streamers can expect their mods to work to help them, by removing harmful content, providing streamers with back-up should a difficult situation arise, as noted by Frazley: "*It is nice knowing that anytime I could quickly go into the Discord¹⁵ and be like 'Hey! All hands on deck! I need you right now'*".

Radders has a few mods who take on key roles in her community:

Radders: Most of my mods, on an average stream, won't have to do much in the way of banning or even timing out. They're really good at either defusing situations, or annoying trolls to the point that they just leave. And if I mean, if they have to ban them, then fine, they've got free rein to do that, because they know what isn't acceptable. But they're really more of the backbone of the community. They are always involved, they talk in chat, they get to know the community members- they are just community members, but with a little bit more responsibility that they choose to take on.

Radders' response highlights the important role that moderators play in maintaining boundaries of streamers, and how she values her moderators not just for their ability to manage the removal of unwanted content in the chat, but also for their active involvement in

¹⁵ Many streamers use their Discord channel as a way of directly communicating with their moderators.

the community, describing them as its “backbone”. As such, through the familiar relationship that Radders’ mods have with her regular viewers, they are able to intervene before situations escalate and to have a deeper understanding of what does and does not constitute acceptable behaviour, as outlined by Radders.

Boundaries with Moderators

Given the important role that moderators play in maintaining the boundaries of streamers, choosing moderators who work in alignment with the streamer and their values is a key concern. Katt Kartel discusses why she is hesitant to recruit more moderators for her channel, after having some difficulties with mods she had chosen in the past:

Katt Kartel: I don't have many mods right now, because I'm comfortable with that, I'm not that big of a streamer, but the mods that are there, if I need them. They will show up, and they will do what they need to do. And I feel like none of them try to overstep and that's super important... I've seen it happen so many times, I've experienced it. I feel like mods are like a mini support system. If you don't have the right ones, you're going to be alone.

Eva: What would constitute overstepping?

Katt Kartel: I had a lot of struggles in the beginning with mods. I never thought that just a little privilege, like being a mod, changes people, how they behave and how they treat you, and that was not cool to me. It's just something that you'd never expect. You think that people want to help, because they genuinely want to, but then you realise that not everyone is as genuine as you would hope ... They'll start trying to tell you what to do with your stream, trying to push you to do things, so you don't want to do, taking credit for things, and just all kinds of really uncomfortable stuff. It's boundary pushing, and they get a complex, and then they get a little bit overzealous, a little bit possessive.

Katt Kartel discusses how some mods try to take over the stream, by telling her what to do and “boundary pushing”. For this reason, she is particularly careful with who she grants moderation privileges to, to ensure that they do not abuse this power in her chat. Similarly, Alice, before she quit streaming, made the decision to mod one of her friends, which she ultimately regretted:

Alice: I asked one of my friends who was watching regularly if she could have an eye on chat, and maybe moderate. It was just a momentary decision that I regret because we weren't that super close. I just picked her because she was coming to pretty much all my streams. But then she started really abusing the mod privileges that I gave her and timing-out friends of mine, just because she felt like it and she thought it was funny. It was very, very weird, and very rude of her. We're not friends anymore. We haven't been for a long time.

Alice talks about how her friend took advantage of becoming mod, interfering with Alice’s streams, and breaking the connection between her and her viewers by undeservingly timing-out people. As moderators tend to be handpicked by streamers and follow their guidance, they form representatives of the stream and its values, and are given a significant degree of

responsibility over the stream. From this incident, Alice had to un-mod this friend, which she says contributed to the end of their friendship.

Both Katt Kartel and Alice's accounts indicate the power of moderators and the importance of selecting them carefully, as well as having a set of guidelines to adhere to. Streamers must maintain a close relationship with their moderators as they form a key part of the support system for streamers, alongside assisting with the day-to-day running of the stream. However, the relationship between streamers and mods must be mediated by clear rules and boundaries that are set by the streamer in order for the community to feel safe and respected, and to ensure that that streamer's labour and relationship with viewers is protected.

Chat Rules

Another tool utilised by streamers and moderators is the creation of chat rules, which allow for viewers to understand the content that is allowed in the chat (Cai et al., 2021), which can change significantly based upon the feelings of the streamer, as described by Jessica Price, *"I think the majority of Twitch streamers do have rules. They'll say, 'These are the chat rules. This is what I'm willing to tolerate. This is what absolutely cannot be done'"*. For example, LeeshCapeesh has the following rules for her stream:

"No ISMS (racism, sexism, ageism, etc...)"

"Trash talking is fine, NO HATEFULNESS!"

"18+ If you click on this stream, I am to assume that you are of age and are permitted to join in on the fun. BUT if you choose to disclose your age and are UNDER 18 you WILL get banned. NO EXCEPTIONS!!!"

"No backseating. I appreciate the help, but trust I'll ask if I need it."

"No links, self-promo, etc. without permission."

The rules set by streamers can be seen prior to joining the stream, so that viewers can have advanced warning of the streamer's boundaries, ensuring that users do not engage in behaviour that violates them, whilst allowing moderators to direct viewers to these rules as an explanation for their actions. Such rules are inherently subjective, as they are based upon the boundaries of the streamer, informed by past experiences, beliefs, and preferences. However, it is easy to imagine how these boundaries could become blurred, like in the distinction between *"trash talking"* and *"hatefulness"*- the former referring to the practice of being lightly insulting within a competitive setting (*"your team sucks!"*), whereas the latter indicates abusive comments designed to offend. In such situations, moderators, or the streamer themselves may act based upon assumptions of the viewer's intent. Streamers also have the ability to check each user's chat history, which presents every message the user has ever posted on any of their streams, allowing the streamer to look for negative patterns of behaviour, or to give the individual the benefit of the doubt. Despite subjectivities, the setting of rules, Katt Kartel argues, helps to establish a *"vision"* for the running of the chat, and can also act as guidelines for moderators, as described by Ashewyn:

Ashewyn: The thing with mods is that they're an extension of you, and a lot of people don't recognise that ... They think mods are these power-hungry people that just go around banning people because they feel like it ... I've given them the rules and guides and they carry out things as if I probably would carry them out on my channel to the best of my ability. So, if I'm not comfortable being called pet names, and someone comes in and calls me 'babe', and I have no idea who they are- that's strange and weird- my mods will take action against that.

Ashewyn's response sheds light on the role and significance of moderators in managing the content of the chat, indicating how she perceives the role of moderators to be as an extension of her own expectations and requirements, which are established through her stream rules. Ashewyn describes these rules as "guides" indicating that moderation is a subjective practice that is likely to vary due to moderator's perceptions and belief around the user's intent. She also notes the perception of mods as "power-hungry" when in fact her mods are individuals enacting her wishes, ensuring that the chat remains a safe space, free from abusive content, and unwanted remarks- such as pet names. Ashewyn's note about the ability of moderators to enact her rules, protecting her from backlash is also echoed by Bella:

Bella: I appreciate the extra step in-between me and a viewer because it's often more comfortable for a mod to say "Hey, cut that out" or "She isn't comfortable with that" than if I were to have to directly say something. I think it helps maintain the sort of friendly vibe of the stream.

Bella emphasises the degree to which moderators act as a defence system for streamers, as they shield them from backlash that comes with enforcing boundaries. Bella likes that moderators put some distance between the streamer and their viewers as such reinforcement allows for her to keep streaming without engaging with negative behaviour, avoiding the emotional labour of managing the interaction. Although moderators implement the rules of the streamer, this often results in pushback from viewers being directed at the moderator instead of the streamer, which underscores the nature of the labour of moderators, which is largely uncompensated emotional labour, that is undertaken for the sake of the community and out of a relationship to the streamer.

For UhhGabi, one of the most important rules for their chat concerns 'backseat gaming', which refers to viewers attempting to influence the player's actions in a game, or continuously suggesting other ways of playing the game:

UhhGabi: Especially when it came to Minecraft, I had a lot of people who are trying to tell me what to do to the point where we actually made a command for backseat gaming, where my mods could just post '!Gaming'¹⁶, 'please do not backseat game'.

UhhGabi utilises their mods to ensure that commands are used informing viewers about backseat gaming, so that they do not ruin UhhGabi's gaming experiences. Some streamers take a very firm approach to backseat gaming and may immediately block or ban users who spoil elements of the game, or continuously pester the streamer with comments on how to play it. However, other streamers may appreciate guidance on how to improve their gameplay

¹⁶ Chat commands refer to the inputting of an exclamation mark followed by a keyword, after which the chat automatically displays a message, such as '!gaming'. Such commands are set up in advance to avoid having to repeat the same information multiple times.

or may learn new methods of completing the game. Thus, many streamers include a mention of backseat gaming in their rules if it is not something they are comfortable with

Dealing with Bots

Whilst abusive content remains a key concern for streamers, for many smaller streamers, a more pervasive issue than trolls is the use of bots, who send harmful links and unwanted content:

SaraBelle: I'm very, very lucky in that I have only gotten the bot messages that are like, 'You want to become famous on Twitch, click this link', you know? Stupid shit.

Annie: Basically, the entirety of what they do is just banning spam bots.

Laura Cress: I've had more issues with things like bots than people. One time, it must have been at least 600 bots that followed me all at once which was incredibly annoying, because it just kept going off, so I had to stop the sound alert. That actually happened over about three days- I kept getting bots coming into the channel and following me. And there's not really much you can do, except just delete them all... Another time, I had bots enter the channel and they're all saying sort of weird messages as if they were human, but you could sort of tell they weren't...and then a moderator said, 'I think they might be bots.' And then suddenly, they all said bot, bot, bot, bot, bot.

Jessie: My mods once banned about 200+ follow bots during one of my podcasts.

Dealing with bots is a common issue by smaller streamers and many streamers use moderators to remove these messages, which can constitute the main responsibility of moderators, particularly for smaller channels. As Laura Cress describes, receiving an influx of bot follows to a channel can trigger sound and banner notifications announcing each new follower, which were duly deleted by her moderators. Such labour from moderators is vital, as a flood of bots to the chat, with potentially hundreds of messages each second, prevents viewers from effectively engaging in the chat, breaking the line of communication between the viewers and the streamer. It is this direct communication that is so vital to building the relationships between viewers and streamers and as such, distracting notifications, and the loss of the chat function forms a threat to the success of the channel if it is not kept under control.

Personal Relationships with Moderators

Whilst moderators can be essential for larger streamers, due to the quantity of messages in the chat, for smaller streamers, moderators are optional, and moderation abilities are often given to regulars or to individuals with whom the streamer has a pre-existing relationship. For example, Jessica has two moderators who are friends of hers, which she argues means that “*he knows what should and shouldn't be said what I'm willing to put up with*”. Their relationship allows for Jessica to trust that her mods will act on her behalf and in her best interests with the moderation. Similarly, LeeshCapeesh, Annie, RGBabby, Aimee, Erin, and Bella all have their partners as moderators on their streams. For Erin, her partner, Trish, is

usually present on-mic during her streams, providing Erin with support both verbally and through moderating the chat: “*It's just great when Trish can be like, 'Fuck you, I'm right here'*”. Aimee’s decision for giving her partner the mod status was very simple, stating “*She’s always watching so she might as well because she’s constantly there*”. As the boundaries set by streamers vary significantly, having friends and family take on the role of moderator can allow for streamers to trust that the role is given to someone who will not abuse the privilege, who will be more familiar with their views and beliefs in order to moderate in accordance with them.

Streaming Without Moderators

AudenCrossing was one of the only participants who did not have any moderators for their stream. They discuss how they have managed without and their approach to handling viewers that cross a line:

AudenCrossing: I do not currently have any mods, which is crazy ... I've got rules that you have to accept, and it's basically just: don't be weird and don't be mean. I'm very sensitive, usually, people are pretty good at it. I've had a couple of people that I've had to like timeout. I haven't had to actually ban anybody, and I'll tell them ahead of time, like, 'Hey, like, you need to calm down, I don't want to ban anybody'. I don't want to tell people they're not welcome in this community, because if you can get it together, and just act better and be respectful, then I am willing to forgive a lot... They've thankfully been pretty good, or they just leave because they see that I'm not somebody who's going to freak out or yell at them or cry or anything like that- they're not going to get that kind of response out of me.

AudenCrossing has managed to work with people who enter their chat and are difficult and tries to get them to change their attitude in order to stay in the stream. Taking on this emotional and affective labour, this approach has been a successful approach as AudenCrossing has not had to ban anyone and has instead provided warnings to individuals that were being rude. She also notes that some of these viewers just leave the stream as they can tell they will not get the reaction they are after out of them.

Limiting Self-Disclosure

Whilst moderators form a key component in the boundaries of streamers, another way in which streamers enact boundaries is through the limiting of self-disclosure (Das and Kramer, 2013). As discussed in the chapter on Intimacy (Chapter 5), disclosure plays an important role in the building of intimacy between streamers and viewers, through sharing problems, updating about life events, utilising the synchronous nature of the chat to have two-way conversation. This section will outline how streamers self-censor, particularly referencing a desire for privacy, and a concern for safety.

One reason for self-censorship from streamers comes from a desire to keep some information private. Radderss talks about the boundaries she has with what she shares with her chat, particularly around her health:

Radders: If I'm having an embarrassing symptom day, where my illness is really not happy with me, and things happen where I'm just like, well, it's great to have a non-functioning body and you just feel like crap. I'm not going to be all like 'I just pooped myself and then I vomited and then this happened and blah, blah, blah'. I'm just gonna say, 'Sorry, guys, no stream. I really feel like I got hit by a truck overnight' ... I feel like I deserve to have at least some privacy in that respect.

As a disabled streamer, Radders has firm boundaries around sharing information about her health, highlighting the balance between being open about her health challenges and maintaining a level of privacy. On Twitch, expectation around openness in the streaming community may create pressure for streamers to disclose personal and sometimes embarrassing details, even in situations when they are not comfortable doing so. It is important to note that Radders' self-censorship is also connected to broader societal discomfort around disability (Fine and Asch, 1988: 8), particularly when it involves discussing intimate bodily functions. For disabled streamers, such questions have the potential to take the focus away from the content the streamer is creating and instead lead to "invasions of privacy and unreasonable questions posed by non-disabled persons presuming a right to know" (Lingsom, 2008: 5).

For Frazley, many of the comments she receives are to do with her transition and her gender identity, and she has to draw lines between what she wants to share, and may be interesting or helpful for others, but also maintaining privacy and boundaries around sharing such intimate information:

Frazley: I get questions like 'Have you had your bottom surgery yet?' and there are loads of reasons why I haven't had that, and I will share, but I choose when and how ... Sometimes people will ask how the family is handling it ... I've talked about them in the past and I've gotten pushback from my family on what I said. So, I do try to be careful there because they can get very upset when I say things ... I definitely try to think through, 'Would I be able to live by what I say?' I have told people very flat-out that I can't wait for my gender-affirming surgery, so I am sometimes very transparent, but I do try to keep boundaries ... I may not always make the right choices.

Frazley outlines her boundaries around what she will talk about with her chat, noting that she often receives invasive questions about her gender transition, particularly relating to her gender-affirming surgery, which she prefers to share on her own terms. Frazley's response highlights a crucial aspect of gender and expectations around openness, as her viewers feel able to enquire about her body and surgery, however, Frazley works to retain agency over her own narrative by carefully deciding when and how to reveal such details. This echoes the work of Persaud and Perks (2022), who describe how LGBTQIA+ streamers "are often viewed as highly visible and seemingly accessible queer elders positioned to dispense advice or affirming commentary when sensitive topics are brought up in the live stream chat... assuming people are bringing these things up in good faith" (480). Additionally, Frazley mentions the impact of her family's reaction to her past disclosures, demonstrating the complexity surrounding disclosure in the context of personal relationships, particularly when her Twitch channel enables her to speak publicly about issues that others wish to keep private. Frazley's response reflects her aims to balance transparency and authenticity alongside boundaries, both for herself and for her family, whilst navigating the expectations of her viewers.

Like Frazley, Ashewyn is also thoughtful about the sharing information about other people in her life, and is particularly mindful of how her friends and family are represented, and their rights to privacy:

Ashewyn: If it involves another person, I generally won't share, because that's a privacy breach unless they're okay with the fact that I'm very public facing. So, family, friends, loved ones, generally I will not share their information. As far as myself, I guess it's whatever I'm comfortable with and over the years, it's looked very different. I am the kind of person that will literally come on stream and be like, 'Hey, guys, guess what my therapist told me? I'm severely depressed!', things of that nature. I'm very okay mentioning that- I'm not afraid of it. But I know that me being so honest and open has allowed a lot of people to feel like I'm relatable, and they want to share things with me. So, it's like, 'She's openly talking about depression and her feelings, that means maybe I can go trauma dump on her because she will relate'. It invites people to put a lot of their baggage onto me that I may not be ready for... the more that you share, the more you're opening up, and you're becoming vulnerable. And people can take advantage of that.

Ashewyn is very cautious of sharing information about other people in her life without their consent, as they did not choose to be a public persona like she did. However, Ashewyn's response also displays her comfort in openly discussing topics in her own life, like mental health, which she believes has helped her form relationships with her viewers, fostering a sense of connection through self-disclosure. As a result, she acknowledges the unintended consequence of inviting others to share their own traumas with her, from which she states she is “*absolutely, and emotionally drained and exhausted: I've hit emotional burnout*” from taking on this emotional and affective labour (Hardt and Negri, 2004). Ashewyn acknowledges that the more she shares, the more vulnerable she becomes, from viewers feeling comfortable to share their own issues, who may take advantage of her empathy and willingness to listen. As such, Ashewyn's response emphasises the challenge of navigating the expectations of authenticity and relatability as a streamer while also protecting her own mental health and emotional wellbeing. As a result, Ashewyn has worked to establish clear boundaries as she “*can't exactly afford to keep those doors open*” and states that her boundaries are “*slightly more refined now*”, with more explicit expectations around the types of personal information that she is comfortable receiving in order to mitigate any harm to her own mental health.

Whilst self-censorship may be utilised to limit the abuse faced on the platform, there are also wider concerns about safety away from Twitch. Thus, streamers must be careful about the information that is shared, and utilise self-censorship to ensure their safety, being careful not to disclose specific location information, or other personal information that could be used to harm them:

Alice: I let people know my first name, but not my last. Most people knew that I was from Germany because my streams were in German... My username did contain my zodiac sign- most people knew the general months that I was born in. But I didn't mention my birthday explicitly, I just kept it at like, age, first name, and general information... I didn't share that much about my personal life because I didn't feel like it was necessary. Maybe if I had a community that I was feeling closer to then I would have shared.

UhhGabi: I'll tell you what I do for work but I'm not going to tell you what company I work for and like, I'll tell people like, 'I live in Central Texas', but I don't give out my city name. And sometimes I'll respond to tweets where it's obvious what area I live in but I'm okay with that because Texas is a big state. I just try not to give out super-duper specific information.

Alice and UhhGabi outline some of the boundaries that they hold regarding self-disclosure, namely personal information that could allow for people to use this information to harm them. Having such firm boundaries is of vital importance for streamers, as there have been several high-profile cases of streamers fearing for their safety from the actions of their viewers. In 2021, popular streamer Valkyrae discussed how her stalker repeatedly doxxed her to the extent that when she saw a message from them, she would hope it was a death threat instead of another doxx (Bennett, 2021). Furthermore, streamer XQC, one of most popular creators, with over 9.6 million followers, was forced to move house after viewers sent multiple police raids to his home- a practice known as 'swatting' – stating that “I was scared I was going to die” (Koepp, 2021). These examples often act as a warning to smaller streamers to take care with what information is available about them and to avoid sharing any more than they have to, particularly when it could put them at risk.

As a primary school teaching assistant, AmberToTheCore also takes particular care with the information she shares on her streams:

AmberToTheCore: I don't like to promote my stream too much just in case one of my kids sees it because it's an 18 plus stream. Sometimes in the heat of the moment when I get really intense in a game I'll swear. And of course, the school doesn't want to be associated with any profanity ... I won't say anything like where we live, what school he [AmberToTheCore's son] goes to. Because I was quite naive in the beginning, but now I know what kind of people are on Twitch, I am a little bit guarded, so they don't know where we live or what school he goes to or what school I work out. Then that's okay. That's where I draw the line- any personal details, there's no way I let them know that.

AmberToTheCore must navigate both a desire to utilise her leisure time and stream as a way of socialising, alongside the need to maintain her professional role as a primary school assistant. Her self-imposed boundaries of not promoting her stream and not sharing personal details such as her location or her son's school demonstrates a recognition of the potential impact of her actions on her job as she notes her concern that if her stream became too popular, students, staff or parents from the school might find it. As an 18+ stream, her content would not be appropriate for the children she works with, and she notes that this might feed back to the school. AmberToTheCore also mentions how is especially cautious so that she keeps her son safe, noting that she knows “*what kind of people are on Twitch*”, referring to the people on the platform that may wish to cause her and other streamers harm.

The experiences illustrate the ways in which limiting self-disclosure functions as a means of ensuring safety. Each of these streamers acknowledges the precariousness of sharing personal information within an environment largely populated by strangers and as such, they take steps to enforce their boundaries around what they share with their viewers.

Boundaries as a Duty Towards Viewers

Whilst participants outline the ways in which they enact boundaries around their personal information for their safety and utilise moderators to prevent bot messages and abuse being posted in the chat, some participants noted a sense of responsibility around protecting their communities, forming part of the emotional and affective labour of streamers. As a Black woman on Twitch, LeeshCapeesh faces another layer of abuse in the form of racist comments and abusive language. She discusses how being from a marginalised community makes you more vulnerable to abuse on Twitch and the steps she takes to make her chat safe, not only for her, but for everyone else who might be affected by some of these interactions:

LeeshCapeesh: There are so many things that I have to do to ensure that my stream is safe. It's not necessarily for me, because I knew what I was getting myself into when I decided to stream and to be a content creator and put myself out there on a public platform. I knew that I was gonna deal with racism, I knew I was gonna deal with sexism, I knew I was gonna deal with all of that. My thing is, I wanted to make sure my community doesn't have to see that. Because I have tough skin but that doesn't mean my community has tough skin and I don't want them to be uncomfortable. So, I have so much moderation ... There are so many ways that you can say the N-word and I basically have all of the words that you just can't use in my stream. I have it set up so you can't clip my stream if you haven't been around for a month. People can't join my Discord unless they sub or if they've been around for a while. There are certain things I have to put in place to ensure that everybody is safe, and that everybody feels comfortable.

LeeshCapeesh discusses how she protects their community from abusive messages, illustrating how she takes on . One of the ways she does this is through pre-emptively blocking certain words and phrases from being used in the chat. This means that she must spend time finding some of the most violent, racist, and offensive slurs and insults and pre-emptively block them from being used against her and their community. LeeshCapeesh also does not allow new viewers to clip her stream, referring to the practice of saving short moments from a stream which can be shared on other platforms, in addition to limiting the joining of her Discord channel. Such proactive measures aim to protect her viewers, as she notes that they may not have the same level of resilience as she does in dealing with racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. LeeshCapeesh response demonstrates how streamers, particularly marginalised creators, may take on this additional labour, managing both her own emotions (Hochschild, 1983), alongside utilising the available tools both on Twitch and Discord as part of her role in building an inclusive and supportive community, which is maintained through her affective labour (Hall, 2015).

Like LeeshCapeesh, Frazley is acutely aware of the importance of ensuring that her community stays safe:

Frazley: There are a lot of Twitch chats I don't want to watch because I get the feeling that the company doesn't care about me. I never want my chat to turn into that. When you lose it like that, I think moderating the community and telling them what they can and can't say is important because when you get larger you don't want your community doing the wrong thing.

Frazley discusses how important it is to her for her viewers to feel safe in the chat of her streams, noting that she is aware of the effect when chats feel like an unsafe environment due to the lack of moderation. For Frazley, this has involved her removing moderators that do not align with these values and Frazley acknowledges that this an ongoing process of ensuring that the mods are representing her and her community to the best of their ability, describing this process as “*shaping*”. Ultimately, as it is her channel, Frazley is the one who decides upon the rules for the stream, even when they are not always popular, noting that sometimes viewers have complained, to which Frazley argues, “*It’s your stream. You make the rules. If people don’t like it, they can get out*”. Such decisions are key elements of the affective labour of streamers, as they evaluate how they support and sustain the relationship with their viewers.

As a viewer on Twitch, I have witnessed the outcomes when a streamer does not have moderators, and in particular, when they refuse to act on the targeting of marginalised groups on Twitch. For example, I was watching a stream by a new creator on the platform when I noticed that several users were ‘spamming’¹⁷ the chat with messages about rape, whilst the streamer refused to act upon these messages, even laughing at the absurdity of the off-topic spam. From the streamer’s inaction and denial of responsibility, I felt myself forming assumptions about their views: that they either endorsed or were ambivalent towards the abuse of women online, that they found such messages funny, and also that they were likely more interested in engagement and controversy than creating a community. The result of this is that, even as a lurker, I felt much less inclined to watch the stream and could not imagine ever engaging with the chat as doing so I believed would enable users to harass me, as a woman on the platform.

Platform Responsibilities

Whilst participants noted the various approaches they take towards setting and maintaining boundaries for their channels, several participants outlined the ways in which Twitch as a platform could better support its creators and users. As an organisation, Twitch’s decision-making processes remain opaque, meaning that the rationale behind policy changes and feature implementations often lacks transparency or is communicated ineffectively (Cai et al., 2023: 18), leaving streamers to feel a sense of disconnection from the platform, with little ability to reach out to challenge decisions, or to bring awareness to ongoing issues with Twitch directly. LeeshCapeesh, who discussed earlier in this chapter the extensive labour she undertakes to remove racist and hateful language from her channel, outlines her frustration at the platform:

LeeshCapeesh: Twitch puts everything on the individual content creators. There are things in place to make sure that you keep yourself safe, I guess so that you don't have to see anything that you don't want to see, but I feel like putting it all on the creator isn't fair and it's just lazy. They know the core foundation of Twitch is probably filled with a lot of racist and hateful people and they don't necessarily want to address that because you know, money, their business at the end of the day. I mean, racists have got money and they're gonna pay, but it just sucks. They're trying to move away from that negativity because you see them doing more things like the Black History programme, the Women's History Month, we just had Asian and Pacific Islanders

¹⁷ ‘Spamming’ refers to sending the same message multiple times.

month, now we're in Pride Month. So, you see them doing little events like this and put in creators from marginalised communities on the front page and giving them more opportunities. But when they asked you to do those things, they put all of the moderation duties on you instead of providing you with resources to help you, you know?

LeeshCapeesh notes how Twitch has taken a very passive approach to making the platform more inclusive, such as using events such as Black History Month and Pride Month to highlight creators on the platform. However, by featuring these marginalised creators so prominently on the front page of the site, Twitch is opening up the opportunity for these streamers to face significantly more traffic to their streams, accompanied with an increase in the number of trolls targeting their stream. As part of the emotional and affective labour undertaken by LeeshCapeesh, she must spend time moderating hateful comments and ensuring that she is fostering a welcoming community, alongside managing her own emotional wellbeing in the face of abusive messages. This issue was also mentioned by BonnieSansClyde:

BonnieSansClyde: Apparently when streamers go on the front page, there are no staff on those pages, they don't jump into those streams. I think there needs to be a specific, moderation team or staff there for all of those because they're throwing you onto the front page, and then just saying, 'Okay, deal with it'. They're presenting all these marginalised people, like last month, they did all the AAPI¹⁸ and this month, they're doing a lot of Pride, and they're just throwing these marginalised people on the front page, it's pretty toxic.

LeeshCapeesh and BonnieSansClyde outline their concerns about the lack of support for marginalised creators, whilst the platform simultaneously gives them exponentially higher levels of visibility. By giving marginalised creators the spotlight, Twitch can claim that it is supporting them, presenting the impression that the platform cares for social causes whilst simultaneously neglecting to commit to transparent and necessary efforts to protect these users from targeted abuse, particularly when it is based on the very characteristics they are aiming to showcase, such as LGBTQIA+, Black, and AAPI creators.

Radders also has concerns about Twitch's approach to keeping users safe, identifying key areas in which the platform fails to protect users, particularly when it comes to high-earning streamers:

Radders: It would be nice if there were more effective ways of banning and if the Twitch's Trust and Safety team actually gave a shit. There are a lot of very big names on the platform who've earned Twitch lots of money and they've been able to treat people any which way they want, and abuse people however they want. And because they make money Twitch gives them a slap on the wrist, and then lets them come back. I'm tired! There aren't consequences for a lot of people who would abuse and harass people for looking different or being different- there's way too much of that on the platform. There are tons of streamers who will just go watch another person's stream on their stream, and then ask the community to go and harass them, they don't get any consequences and they don't get banned, all because they're popular... It's frustrating that Twitch hasn't openly committed themselves to being better and owning their mistakes and letting you call them out. And they you know, they will 'address things'

¹⁸ Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who were featured on Twitch's homepage for AAPI Heritage Month

but it's all PR, it's very surface level talk. Because, deep down, they don't want to address the issues if it'll cost some money.

Radders highlights the lack of platform responsibility and accountability on Twitch for keeping streamers safe, emphasising the ineffectiveness of banning and the disinterest of Twitch's Trust and Safety team, particularly when larger streamers are involved. Banning on Twitch is useful against an individual who has repeatedly stepped out of line, but more coordinated attacks are likely to use multiple accounts, for which each individual account would have to be banned. Many participants such as Bex_Bomb, LeeshCapeesh, and Jambo identified an IP ban as a potential solution to this problem, however, Twitch has seemed hesitant to initiate such support. From Twitch's opaque structures and lack of transparency around policies, some streamers like Radders feel that there is a lack of consequences for those who abuse and harass others, particularly when such individuals bring in significant revenue to the platform. As such, the opacity of actions of the platform contributes to a power imbalance in which larger streamers can act with impunity or with a "*slap on the wrist*". Such behaviour, alongside the concerns raised by LeeshCapeesh and BonnieSansClyde indicate a fundamental lack of trust in the platform to keep its users safe and speaks to a company culture that prioritises profit over the wellbeing of its users, particularly its marginalised creators.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the ways in which women and non-binary streamers implement boundaries as part of their labour on Twitch, arguing that this forms a crucial element of the relationships between streamers and their viewers. The first section of this chapter highlighted the prevalence of trolling and abusive behaviour on Twitch, demonstrating the reasons why participants implement boundaries. The abusive actions from other users that were experienced by participants emphasised the necessity they felt to protect themselves from harm and by establishing clear boundaries, streamers can deter potential such behaviour, creating a safer streaming environment for both themselves and their community. In the second section of this chapter, the role of moderators was analysed as one way that streamers maintain boundaries, emphasising their crucial role in enforcing the guidelines set by the streamers. These individuals provide vital support through their voluntary labour, allowing streamers to focus on their content whilst keeping the chat a safe environment. The third section analysed participants' use of self-censorship in relation to concerns around privacy, both for themselves and for their family and friends, and safety, particularly against a backdrop of high-profile cases of harassment and doxxing. By withholding aspects of their personal lives, streamers are able to better control the level of information shared with their audience, safeguarding their wellbeing and maintaining a sense of autonomy. The fourth section of this chapter explored the duty that some streamers feel towards their viewers, and the importance of maintaining boundaries so that their stream remains a safe space for everyone, but in particular, marginalised individuals. This duty is evidenced through the additional affective labour taken on by streamers, such as LeeshCapeesh, who described how she would search out every harmful racist term and individually block it so that she and her viewers would not have it used against them. In the fifth and final section, participants' criticisms of Twitch were addressed, in particular, the ways in which they felt that Twitch uses marginalised creators for the optics of having a diverse platform, without taking the necessary steps to better protect its users, such as by having better moderation. Such concerns

were also compounded by the opacity of the platform, including with how it navigates abusive behaviour that is undertaken by high-earning streamers. By illustrating how marginalised streamers implement boundaries, this thesis aims to offer greater understandings of how women and non-binary people navigate their interactions with their audience on Twitch and how they protect both themselves and their viewers from harm. Thus, this work adds a crucial dimension to the existing discourse on online abuse and trolling, enhancing not only knowledge of the strategies employed by streamers but also highlighting the duty that many streamers feel towards protecting their audience from harmful content.

Chapter 7: Performing Authenticity: The Challenges, Tensions, and Paradoxes of Being Authentic on Twitch

Introduction

At any given moment, there are likely to be thousands of streamers playing the top video games, creating art and music, and ‘*Just Chatting*’ on Twitch, offering an inconceivable number of options for a new viewer. Whilst one may be drawn to a particular genre, it is the connection with the streamer that turns a viewer into a regular. Authenticity is a theme that ties together conceptions of intimacy and boundaries on Twitch, presenting a challenging landscape which streamers must navigate to maintain an authentic connection with their audience whilst also meeting expectations for financial support. Throughout this chapter, the importance of authenticity to the relationships with viewers is emphasised, supported by participant-created understandings of authenticity and data gathered from observation. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the majority of the participants for this research and indeed, the majority of streamers on Twitch overall stream for their own enjoyment, in addition to either a full-time job or education. In the chapter on Labour (Chapter 4), I outlined the ambition of participants which typically indicated that streamers did not start streaming with the aim of it being their full-time career, although a few did discuss having such ambitions. Instead, most participants were focused on building a community around themselves which I discussed further in the chapter on Intimacy (Chapter 5). However, alongside understandings of intimacy and community, throughout the interviews, every participant discussed how authenticity was a vital ingredient to their Twitch streams.

In this chapter, I will examine understandings of authenticity and its role in streaming by discussing the definition and value of authenticity according to streamers themselves. In particular, I aim to how streamers perform authenticity on Twitch through vulnerability, and how being live supports this performance. Finally, this chapter will discuss challenges with being authentic and how one can be considered inauthentic, including how money and sponsorships impact authentic behaviour on the platform. Throughout this chapter, I will argue that authenticity forms a vital component of the relationships between streamers and their viewers, allowing them to build more meaningful relationships with their audience and serving as the foundation for fostering connection in this environment. In my analysis, I aim to offer insights into the ways in which notions of authenticity are constructed, negotiated, and contested in this dynamic and the impact of self-branding, commodification, and viewer policing that challenges the development of relationships on the platform.

Defining and Understanding Authenticity

I started this research wrestling with the concept of authenticity as it formed a challenge in how exactly it should be defined for this research. Research by Moulard et al. (2015) on celebrities and authenticity generated the definition as “the perception that a celebrity behaves according to his or her true self” (175). Although most streamers are not celebrities in the same sense, they are public figures, often with sizeable followings and influence and thus acting in accordance with their “true self” is of considerable importance. Streaming inherently involves a level of self-presentation for which individuals may adjust their behaviour in order to engage their audience effectively. However, participants noted how

such adjustments are part of being entertaining for viewers, and thus the emotional labour involved in altering their behaviour, and striking a balance between being entertaining and authentic, is viewed as distinct from their understandings of inauthenticity, which are discussed further in this chapter.

In this environment, applying these understandings of authenticity requires for streamers to have an inner ‘real’ or ‘true’ self, that is available when alone or with close friends and family, alongside motivations that come from genuine connections with viewers, instead of being driven by money or popularity. This aligns with the work of Goffman (1952) in creating a distinction between what we can understand as “frontstage”, in which individuals act “in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (3) and also “backstage” for which individuals are away from the expectations that shaped frontstage behaviour and are more comfortable and ‘true’ to themselves in a way that they would not feel comfortable to do in public settings. Although Goffman’s framework was designed for in-person environments, considerable work has been achieved to shift the focus to online social contexts (Karhulahti, 2016; Kondakciu et al., 2022). However, Goffman’s framework in relation to authenticity does present a contradiction: if an individual’s self is shifting according to the social context, can there exist a fixed, authentic self? (Reckwitz, 2020: 99).

Furthermore, in order to examine authenticity within the structures of Twitch, I also felt it was important to first acknowledge the basis on which authenticity has become a co-opted concept under capitalism (Moore, 2011), adopted by brands who benefit from the imprecision of the term. In this environment, particularly when utilising social media, “emotions have become entities to be evaluated, inspected, discussed, bargained, quantified, and commodified” in what Illouz (2007) refers to as “emotional capitalism” (109). As discussed in the chapter on Labour (Chapter 4), on Twitch, streamers are workers for Twitch, generating the company money through running advertisements, and for those earning tips and subscriptions, splitting the money 55% for the streamers and 45% to Twitch. Twitch streamers may attract viewers from their talent at playing a particular game, but for the most part, viewers stay for the streamer’s personality. Thus, the personalities of streamers have become commodified, branded, and shaped by expectations, forming “affective, immaterial labour that is purposefully undertaken by individuals in order to garner attention, reputation and potentially, profit” (Hearn, 2010: 427).

Instead of bringing my own understanding of ‘authenticity’ to each interview, I instead asked each participant an open-ended question to find out what they feel the relationship is between authenticity and streaming, forming a key component of the participant-centred approach taken for this research as it “engages in collective meaning-making” (Potts et al., 2022: 2543). Every participant demonstrated awareness of the importance and value of authenticity on the platform and the vast majority signalled that they view being seen as authentic as vital to their work as streamers however, it is important to acknowledge that definitions of authenticity provided by participants may not align with each other. This divergence is not only expected but is integral to the participant-centred nature of this research. Authenticity is a multifaceted and subjective concept (Bueno de Andrade-Matos et al., 2021), and different individuals experience and interpret it in varied ways. Whilst my own perspective on authenticity as “the ability to be oneself or to follow one’s true self” (Nartova-Bochaver et al., 2021: 4), whilst also acknowledging the aforementioned co-optation of authenticity within capitalist systems (Moore, 2011), participants’ views varied slightly, often focusing on aspects like relatability or spontaneous interactions. These variations both strengthen and

limit the analysis. On one hand, the diverse definitions enrich the research by highlighting the complexity of authenticity within the context of Twitch streaming, offering a broader understanding of the nuanced ways authenticity is perceived and enacted in practice. On the other hand, such variations can limit the analysis by making it more challenging to identify clear patterns. However, despite different perspectives, I argue that each of these responses are connected through their shared understanding of authenticity as not putting on a persona, even if you are considered an ‘online personality’. Furthermore, it is important to note that such conceptions of authenticity are centred around the sense of authenticity from the streamer’s perspective and do not necessarily result in others viewing the streamer as authentic. I set out below a few of the examples of definitions provided by participants:

Riley: For me, authenticity is just being myself... I just feel very lucky that I'm getting to be myself now. For me, that is success enough... I've met streamers that have put on a very different act from who they are in real life. And I think that's sad because you shouldn't have to pretend to be somebody else.

Ashewyn: I think this will vary person to person. Because some people will argue that when you're a personality, authenticity is the best way to connect with your audience, your community, because everyone wants someone to relate to. Everyone wants to feel more human and less alone. That would be my definition: authenticity to the point where people can see your values and your feelings and your life challenges and be able to relate to them and feel less alone.

Sara Belle: Authenticity, for me, is a lot of gut feeling and intuition.

Performing Authenticity

“Thank you for hanging out with me today.... I like that we get to do that. Thank you for all the love and support ...I love, love, love getting to spend this time with y’all. Us getting to hang out has kept me sane throughout this pandemic...I feel like I’m still hanging out with friends... I love you guys.”

This is how Partnered streamer Jambo signs off a recent stream, taking ten minutes to thank everyone who had watched her stream, donated, and messaged in the chat. As she thanked her viewers, she also interacted with messages in the chat, interrupting herself by responding directly to viewers, usually without reading the comment aloud for those not following the chat. The immediacy of the exchanges and Jambo’s unplanned, off-the-cuff responses provide a sense of authenticity to her interactions with the chat whilst the exclusion of those not attentively following the chat allows for those paying close attention to feel part of something more intimate. This contrasts with what can be understood as a more typical celebrity experience for which this level of access and line of communication does not exist. Instead, many of these interactions are “fabricated, inauthentic, and theatrical” (Marwick, 2015: 345), created for media consumption and attention. On Twitch, the immediacy provides a layer of authenticity through unrehearsed, casual communication, with streamers responding directly to messages, without taking time to consider how every word will be interpreted. Such moments create “a meaningful and authentic form of interpersonal exchange” (Bernstein, 2001: 402), with Jambo developing an “outward countenance” (Hochschild, 1983: 7) through emotional labour that engages with viewers and encourages them to see her display of affection as genuine.

The instantaneous nature of the communication on Twitch was raised by participants Annie and Bex_Bomb who both argued that it contributes to the authenticity of streamers on the platform:

Annie: On Twitch there's that real time interaction in a way that isn't doctored. Because when you make a comment on YouTube, the person who replies to your comment could have sat there for an hour and carefully crafted the best response to make them look as good as possible. When you ask something to a Twitch streamer, and they answer it immediately...I think that's something that really draws a lot of people to Twitch.

Bex_Bomb: I think that's what makes it quite unique about Twitch is that it's live, it's in the moment: you can't fake it too much.

Both Annie and Bex_Bomb highlight how the immediacy of communication on Twitch and the lack of ability to prepare responses allows for the viewers to feel like they are more authentic. When responding immediately to comments in the chat, the streamers cannot consider the best possible way to reply and instead must speak in a way that is authentic to who they are. This real-time interaction and inability to edit on Twitch allows for disruptions to the flow of the streamer which, as argued by Consalvo et al. (2020), contributes to the impression of authenticity. As discussed in the chapter on Intimacy (Chapter 5), such liveness is also an important element to the development of intimacy, as co-presence is developed through the shared online environment and time together (Zhao and Elesh, 2008).

Karhulahti (2016) argues that Goffman's dramaturgical framework helps to divide streaming into two frames. Firstly, there is the 'interview frame' or conversation, in which the broadcaster talks to the audience, responding to comments in the chat. The second frame is the 'play frame' in which the broadcaster focuses on the game or alternative media that they are playing or watching. Events that interrupt the streamer have the effect of "disorienting" the current frame (Karhulahti, 2016: 2) and "force" streamers "to act outside the usual frames" of their streams, offering viewers "an alternative reality show" (5). When lurking in chat during participants' streams, I could choose any of their streams and I would have found unplanned moments that are shown live to their viewers. One particular example that I enjoyed watching was LeeshCapeesh being interrupted by her cat, just as she was about to make a key decision in the game she was playing:

LeeshCapeesh was streaming *Tell Me Why*, an episodic adventure game in which the player has to make decisions that alter the course of the game. Right as the game is about to get her to make another important choice, for which her viewers are offering their own opinions in the chat, LeeshCapeesh's cat Goku starts loudly meowing whilst off-camera.

"What do you want Goku?", she asks, leaning out of view of the camera before returning and picking up the cat. The in-game decision is put on hold as LeeshCapeesh sings to her cat, laughing as he squirms and then jumps off her, leaving fur all over her white top. The chat explodes with messages:

"He's SO CUTE!!!!!"

"HII GOKU"

“Baby Gokuuuuuu”

“Goku ready to FIGHT”

“BIG MAN IS HERE”

“Kitty emotes when??”

“Can we get a Goku emote? Cause he's SO CUTE!!!”

Brushing off the fur, LeeshCapeesh seamlessly goes back into the gameplay, *“Alright, I think I should tell Eddie that I killed Mary-Ann”*, as viewers can hear Goku continuing to meow in the background and continue to post messages about both the gameplay decision and about the brief appearance of Goku. Spontaneous moments like these on the livestreams provide viewers with a sense of authenticity through unplanned and unedited moments, directed off-screen providing viewers with a glimpse of how LeeshCapeesh is away from Twitch. Such moments can also be seen from streamers answering a doorbell for a delivery, children making noise in the background, or even law enforcement in the case of swatting¹⁹. On YouTube, it is likely that any interruptions would be edited out, with viewers none the wiser. However, live on Twitch, viewers get to see unplanned events that provide viewers with greater insight into the behaviour of streamers, with spontaneity appearing more authentic in comparison to pre-planned content. It is this spontaneity which allows for viewers to view the streamer as “uncontrived and natural-seeming” (Dubrofsky and Wood, 2014: 282), contributing to the sense of authenticity.

Alongside liveness aiding perceptions and performance of authenticity, participants also indicated a key difference between how they behave on stream compared to off-stream- a preference towards energetic streams, exaggerating enthusiasm and positivity:

AmberToTheCore: I'm a little bit livelier, a bit more entertaining. When I come off stream, I feel like I need to be grumpy again.

UhhGabi: I am definitely more high energy on my streams than I am in real life. But that's because I can't scream and curse as much as I do on my streams in real life.

Jessie: On-stream is pretty much an overexaggerated version of myself.

Jambo: The only thing that really changes [when online] is that I'm a lot louder... I still worry that people aren't gonna like me if I were my full personality on stream.

These responses by AmberToTheCore, UhhGabi, and Jessie highlight how streamers feel the need to change their behaviour in order to succeed on Twitch. Although many participants implied a difference between their online and offline selves, this research does not adopt the “online/offline dichotomy” which aims to “conceptualise the digital world as ‘virtual’ and ‘fake’ and the physical world as more ‘real’ and ‘authentic’” (Reade, 2020: 537). Given the

¹⁹ Swatting refers to the practice of sending in the U.S. SWAT force by deceiving emergency services through a hoax call regarding a violent crime. In such events, the SWAT team often force the streamer to let them into the property and streamers do not have time to end their stream so that viewers get to watch the events unfold. Swatting has already resulted in one death (BBC News, 2018).

convergence of technology throughout our daily lives, including in interpersonal communication, such distinctions are more to illustrate the difference between who they are on Twitch against who they are off-stream and with their close friends and family, instead of implying that the self when streaming is less real.

SaraBelle also discusses her perceptions of her own authenticity when she is on stream, noting that the competition for attention on the platform requires her to “*elevate*” her online self:

SaraBelle: I do tend to put a lot of pressure on myself to be more interesting ... a little bit more of my bubbly self, or my best self, a self that's constantly cracking jokes, trying not to be too self-deprecating ... just putting out an entertaining persona. One that's still authentic enough to me, but it's just sort of an elevated version of what people will find in my everyday life. It can definitely be exhausting after a few hours ... Some people choose not to do that little bit of a performance or elevate their persona and whether or not those people see a growth in their community is to be seen, but I know I'm competing for people's attention. So, I'm going to try to do what I can that feels authentic to me to get them to draw to draw them in and get them to stay.

Each of the quotes above describe forms of an “*elevated*” self, that is designed to keep the attention of the viewer, and provide an entertaining show, however, none of the participants here describe such behaviour as ‘inauthenticity’. I argue that this is because such behaviour involves invoking emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). The emotional labour involved in streaming was examined within the chapter concerning Labour on Twitch (Chapter 4) and here we can see an example of the ways emotion management forms part of the work of streamers: ‘surface acting’, indicating the control of facial expression and body language, and ‘deep acting’, working to alter the feelings and emotions that are felt by the individual (Hochschild, 1983). A significant component of being a successful streamer is to keep viewers engaged and watching their streams, which relies upon being online regularly, being lively and interesting, and “minimizing the ‘down time’ that might lead to disinterest” (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019: 817). SaraBelle argues that without this emotional labour, her channel would not be as appealing to viewers and questions whether those who do not engage with emotion work would see success. However, as argued by Hochschild (1983), emotion management does not necessarily imply inauthenticity, and only does so in cases in which the ‘deep acting’ requires emotions that are at odds with the individual’s sense of self. Instead, this form of “impression management” (Leary and Kowalski, 1990), referring to the strategic presentation of self, in order to generate a particular response from others, can still be considered authentic as it is building upon genuine feelings.

Value of Authenticity

Every participant interviewed for this research was able to indicate some awareness of authenticity through discussions of their own stream or comparatively against streamers that they consider to be inauthentic. I will discuss some of these perceptions further on in this chapter. Whilst understandings of authenticity may vary between streamers, it became clear that they consider there to be a value in being authentic and indicate that it is also something that their viewers desire of them. Through each response, we can see that authenticity is utilised in the building of relationships between viewers and streamers, through promoting trust and intimacy.

When asked about how authenticity factors into her time on Twitch, Annie discussed how it forms a big part of streaming:

Annie: [Streamers] live off that optic of being authentic. That's their bread and butter and well, I can't be putting on a charade...I think people like that about Twitch. I think that's why people watch.

Annie notes how a significant part of the role of streamers is being seen to be authentic. Although saying that she “*can't be putting on a charade*”, Annie’s response highlights how it is not necessarily *being* authentic that is important, instead being *viewed* as authentic, indicating that the viewers have expectations of how streamers should act on stream, placing great value on them seeming to be authentic. Annie’s response highlights one of the paradoxes regarding authenticity and Twitch: streamers are expected to be authentic, yet this expectation itself may compel them to perform in ways that may not be entirely genuine. This tension underscores the complex dynamics of authenticity in digital content creation, where the appearance of being ‘real’, forming part of the emotional and affective labour of streamers, often takes precedence over actually being ‘real’.

AudenCrossing also notes how much her viewers value authenticity, stating that if they found out that she was not being herself, they would not enjoy her streams:

AudenCrossing: I felt like my goal with my stream was to create a community where I felt welcome and to feel like these people knew me and accepted me. And I couldn't do that if I wasn't being who I was. Because if I was completely fabricating my personality, and making myself seem entirely different, and then they liked that person, I think I would have to keep that up forever because if they ever found out the type of person I really was, they would hate it. I think I would then just get a feeling of being unwelcome in my own community and then I wouldn't want to do it anymore.

AudenCrossing’s response indicates how she feels like she has to be herself, because if she did not keep up the façade, her viewers would no longer enjoy her content. Streaming in a way that she finds authentic, AudenCrossing finds value in being liked for who she really is, building a community in which she considers the viewers to truly know her. For her viewers, they have chosen to be part of her streams under the impression that AudenCrossing is being authentic, and if they thought AudenCrossing was inauthentic, they would no longer consider their relationship in the same way. AudenCrossing’s response also connects back to the earlier chapter on Intimacy (Chapter 5), which demonstrated the ways in which intimacy can be developed using self-disclosure, building trust through sharing personal information. AudenCrossing describes how important it is to her to be known by her community, which she states would not be possible without her being authentic.

UhhGabi discusses the choices they made around being authentic on Twitch, in particular their decision to change their content:

UhhGabi: I'm not good at the games that I play, I'm really not. I basically just streamed Minecraft at first, but I think one of the reasons I stopped streaming was because I gave myself this mindset 'people only want to watch you for your Minecraft content', and I burned out. When I came back to streaming, I've been streaming Genshin Impact and Minecraft. And I'm not good when people watch me, but I think

that's part of the appeal because I'm not the best, and I don't have a good filter. I just say whatever is on my mind and a lot of people think that's really funny.

UhhGabi demonstrates the emotional and impression management that they engaged in to generate more audience engagement and support, based upon the idea that they were there to watch *Minecraft* content, which forms part of their “consistent self-brand” (McRae, 2017: 20).. In order to stream *Minecraft* whilst being “burned out”, UhhGabi will have had to invoke ‘surface acting’ (Hochschild, 1983), in order to regulate their facial expressions to give the impression that they are enjoying the game. UhhGabi will likely have also used ‘deep acting’ (Hochschild, 1983) in order to attempt to change their emotions, and to embrace their role as a *Minecraft* streamer. After facing exhaustion from this emotional labour, on returning to Twitch, UhhGabi decided to stream in a way that they considered to be more authentic. Instead of streaming because they are particularly talented at a game, they stream whichever games they actually want to play, and trust that their viewers are there because of their personality and authenticity, which UhhGabi also attributes to their lack of a filter when talking with viewers.

SaraBelle was cautious about falling into the same situation as UhhGabi and being thought of as a streamer who only streams one game. Therefore, from the start SaraBelle worked to make sure that she kept her focus on what she wants to do and what feels authentic for her, instead of letting her stream be dictated by her viewers:

SaraBelle: I know that content creation is about entertaining viewers, but the decisions that I make about my channel are not always going to be about the viewers- I never want to feel like I'm pigeon-holed by my community. I'm trying to build an understanding community where I can come to them and create the kind of content that I need to make in the moment. If I ever feel sort of put in a box, I immediately want to stop doing that stuff... I want to create entertaining content, and I want my community to have a say in my content but ultimately, the decision is mine and I want to build a community that's okay with that. They're not there for the games, they're there for me and they're there for my personality. That's what I'm hoping to create. Because I do know people like variety streamers, I know people who just show up because they want to hang out with the streamer and whatever game they're playing, great... But at the end of the day, they're there for the streamer.

SaraBelle’s response shows awareness of the same concerns faced by UhhGabi in experiencing burnout from streaming according to the perceived wishes of the chat instead of their own wants. Through defining herself as a ‘variety streamer’, SaraBelle aims to build a community who are there for her as a whole person rather than the specific game she plays, and as such, she does not aim to direct her content choices around her audience, instead choosing to make authentic choices based primarily on her own interests.

Like UhhGabi and SaraBelle, Erin wants her viewers to watch her channel for her personality and her authenticity:

Erin: Twitch is like the steroid version of [performing live], because being yourself and being authentically you- as long as you're not a toxic, shitty person, because y'all aren't going to make it- if you are a good person with good intentions, then you're celebrated. I do the weirdest and dumbest shit on stream and people celebrate it. And when I realised that Twitch was that place where I literally don't have to put on a

front, I can say whatever comes out of my mouth, give or take being politically correct, I can literally be my own personality, unabashedly.

Erin found that the streamers that she connected with the most were ones who she deemed to be authentic, an understanding she made after seeing streamers behave in a way that could be “obnoxious” but still true to themselves, which she found funny. Erin noted how these streamers were still successful despite not behaving in a way that seemed traditionally designed to appeal to viewers and after finding these streamers, when it came to her own stream, Erin felt able to also behave authentically. Erin found her own success with this approach, with viewers who enjoy that she does not have a filter and go as far as to celebrate who she is.

Jessica Price also enjoys streamers who do not change themselves to appeal to viewers and discusses how streamers manage to walk the line between being a “normal person” and a streamer:

Jessica Price: I really do value people who have principles and stick to them and don't try to compromise themselves. And I don't even think it's wrong for people to want to create a brand that is sellable to people. But it is refreshing to see a normal person streaming and just being very down to earth and accessible without being too open about what's going on and allowing people to be a bit too familiar with them. Because I think it's a weird balance trying to keep a distance from people but also trying to engage with them on a human level.

Jessica’s response highlights how the overwhelming majority of streamers on Twitch are “normal” people in that they are not celebrities with large followings and are instead individuals streaming games they enjoy to several viewers. As such, streamers on Twitch can be considered part of the “ordinary/extraordinary paradox” (Dyer, 1979; Usher, 2020) in that they gain attention through simply being themselves online, or at least appearing to do so. Jessica also indicates that the sharing of personal information as part of sharing an authentic self on Twitch must also be mediated by boundaries around disclosure and deciding what to share. Such boundaries, Jessica states, form part of behaving in an authentic and ‘human’ way, that is, by not sharing every element of who she is.

Bex_Bomb also discusses the comparison between celebrities and streamers, noting that the two-way relationship between streamers and viewers is what draws people to Twitch:

Bex_Bomb: The people I'm drawn to like on Twitch are the more realistic ones, than people that aren't maybe flashing something that is unrelatable to me... I think that the appeal of content creators is because they're not celebrities, they're not someone that we see on the red carpet or wherever they're just like that in their daily life... I think that is definitely a big appeal for Twitch as people can have that relationship back with them. Whereas with celebrities, you obviously don't really get that at all.

For Bex_Bomb, authenticity comes from being able to relate to the individual, and connect with them (Nartova-Bochaver, 2023), as is possible with the two-way communication afforded by Twitch. In contrast, with traditional celebrities, it is not expected that the average person could get in contact with them and have a conversation (Leith, 2021: 113). Although social media has brought people closer to celebrities in that they can message them or tweet at them in the hope that the individual will see it, for the most part, people consume the

celebrity's content without expecting to be able to communicate with them. However, on Twitch, the chat feature means that those consuming a streamer's content can immediately respond to the streamer and there is a significantly higher likelihood of getting a response. Even when the streamer only acknowledges the message, or thanks the viewer for their donation, the fleeting exchange provides a moment of recognition of the viewer, fuelling the ideas that the streamer is authentic as they are getting to communicate and build a relationship with a streamer, making the streamers seem more 'real'. Bex_Bomb's response also refers to the "daily life" aspect of streaming, in which viewers often get to view or hear discussed the more mundane aspects of a streamer's day. Often when watching a stream, I would hear a streamer talk about the food they ordered- which they then collect from the door and eat on stream. Others take a break, stating that they have to go to the toilet or, as discussed for LeeshCapeesh earlier, small interruptions like those of a pet or family member. Through such actions and a degree of unpredictability, authenticity can be generated from the access to what is often considered the more private aspects of someone's life, offering them "privileged access" (Jamieson, 2011: 2.3) to parts of their life that they would be unlikely to share in such detail to strangers. As discussed earlier in this thesis, disclosures, even on a mundane day-to-day level, can contribute to feelings of closeness and intimacy.

Vulnerability

One theme that arose from the data was the importance of sharing deeply personal information as a way of being authentic on Twitch. The importance of disclosure and building trust was discussed in the chapter on Intimacy (Chapter 5), and also contributes to the portrayal of an authentic self on Twitch (Berryman and Kavka, 2018). This vulnerability typically takes the form of discussing more personal information and sharing experiences that one might not typically share with strangers in order to present more authentically. Sharing negative or difficult experiences may appear authentic as it contradicts behaviour that one might typically associate with social media, which offers a "more curated representation of self" (Tang et al., 2016: 4775). By being open and vulnerable with their viewers, streamers are able to develop a stronger connection with them and in return, the community in the chat can provide support for the streamer and each other, even expanding the community, based on shared experiences (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019a). Sharing in this format provides viewers with intimate information about the experiences of the streamer, for example, living with mental illness (de Wit et al., 2020) but also the knowledge that they are not alone if they are experiencing something similar. Ashewyn has found that sharing about her mental health experiences has allowed her viewers to connect with her more:

Ashewyn: I am the kind of person that will literally come on stream and be like, 'Hey, guys, guess what? My therapist told me I'm severely depressed'. Things of that kind of nature. I'm very okay mentioning that, I'm not afraid of it. I know that me being so honest, and open has created a lot of people to feel like I'm relatable, and they want to share things with me.

For Ashewyn, allowing this vulnerability with her viewers was not an immediate step that she took but instead a process of opening up to them over a longer period of time:

Ashewyn: You don't have to be 100% yourself when you come onto a platform, and start to share, because the more that you share, the more you're opening up, and you're becoming vulnerable. And people can take advantage of that. And that's a very

tricky slope, and slippery slope with content creation. But at the same time, some people crave a little bit of authenticity, because they don't want you to just be another person that just plays video games with no opinions about anything, you know, like, you might be funny, you might be like, witty, you might be very good at games, but then there's nothing else there that they get to see of you. They just know you by these kinds of traits that you have. I might struggle a little bit with sharing too much something that I've been talking about a lot in therapy. I might be exposing myself to vulnerabilities by being very authentic.

Ashewyn describes the balancing act between being authentic by allowing her viewers to get to know her on a deeper level, and also the vulnerability that accompanies sharing personal information. Her response also indicates a central conflict in the bid to demonstrate authenticity through sharing vulnerabilities- by allowing viewers and strangers to learn this information about her, it could be used against her through targeted harassment and trolling (de Wit et al., 2020). Like Ashewyn, Jambo is very aware of the repercussions of being vulnerable with her viewers. However, Jambo feels that showing this side of herself is important on stream as it shows she is a real human being:

Jambo: This is being authentic and being open and transparent about what's happened in my life and my mental health struggles has opened me up to harassment and it's been hard. But it's worth it because there are people out there who sometimes just need to hear that there is somebody feeling what they feel and that, as cliché as it sounds, it's okay to not be okay... Like, I'm not gonna sit here and spew this everyday sunshine bullshit. If you come in to chat and it's a bad day for someone, we can talk about it. I think that humanity is what makes streaming so cool. Everyone you're talking to is a human being. And I am so happy that in the time that I've been here, I've never lost sight of that, and I don't think I ever will. It's incredibly humbling that there are people who take time out of their day to spend time with you.

Jambo works to be authentic on her streams by being open and honest with her viewers, including about parts of her life that are more difficult and leave her vulnerable to harassment. However, she notes that this vulnerability is what makes her human and why people watch streamers, drawing attention to the real intimacy that exists on Twitch between streamers and viewers. Jambo's response also indicates that authenticity is something that is valued highly on Twitch whereas to be inauthentic, or just viewed as inauthentic is considered a violation of the expectations of viewers.

Challenges with Being 'Authentic'

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed how streamers view the importance of authenticity to their work as streamers, and its perceived value by viewers. This section aims to examine challenges that come as part of the process of being authentic on Twitch. Although participants indicated that they put a significant amount of value on being authentic for their viewers, a number of challenges were indicated in their responses.

One issue with the desire to be authentic is when the streamer is not feeling like they want to stream. This can be because of their physical and mental health or life circumstances that make them feel like they do not want to talk to people and be live on camera for an audience. However, streaming is not solely a method of socialising. For streamers like Radders,

streaming is a source of income from being a Twitch Partner, whereas other streamers like AudenCrossing still face expectations around their streaming schedule that may conflict with ongoing issues in their personal lives:

AudenCrossing: In the worst-case scenarios I won't stream. If I can't get myself out of it, then I'll skip a stream. And that sucks and I feel awful when I do it. Sometimes it gets to a point where I'm like, a half-job is better than nothing but if that's gonna make everybody feel worse, including myself, I'm not going to do that at all. And I'll just come back when I am in a better headspace.

Radderss: There have been times where I haven't felt like myself. I've gone through a lot over the years, like my cat died a couple of weeks ago and I just couldn't stream. I was just too wrapped up in this empty chasm that was just missing from my soul. And I couldn't bring myself to be the happy, more entertaining part of myself, I couldn't bring that out. I just couldn't. [Viewers] never pressured me to stream during those times- they're always so, so nice about it. So really, it's never been a pressure from them. It was always an internal pressure.

For AudenCrossing and Radderss, one of the main issues they have faced in trying to be authentic on Twitch is streaming when not physically or mentally well. Both streamers indicate that sometimes they are unable to manage the ‘deep acting’ involved in continuing to stream through regulating their own emotions, and do not want to conduct ‘surface acting’ by putting on a front and controlling their observable emotions (Hochschild, 1983). For AudenCrossing and Radderss, the most authentic option is not to stream and fake how they feel. Writing on the prevalence of ‘burnout’ in digital content production Glatt (2022) notes how not taking breaks and the seemingly endless aspirational labour leads to mental health concerns, particularly as taking a break from streaming may impact their success (3863). However, such decisions are “part and parcel of negotiating neoliberal media entrepreneurship” (Bingham, 2020: 270), and reflect the broader challenges faced by content creators in balancing personal well-being, and being able to be authentic on Twitch, with professional demands.

One challenge that LeeshCapeesh discovered was having her channel grow exponentially. Working alongside this growth in popularity, being authentic on the platform became a way of her staying “grounded”:

LeeshCapeesh: I fought really hard to be my most authentic self, especially while growing so rapidly and becoming more visible in the gaming space. Because I feel when a lot of people get on or they start getting their shine, a lot of people put up a persona or mask to be more comfortable. I feel like they feel pressured into being something that they're not. And me being authentic to myself, and being true to myself, honestly, has really helped me out and has kept me grounded.

LeeshCapeesh finds that working on being authentic on Twitch, even as her channel grew, was a way of making sure that she was working in accordance with her beliefs and making sure that she did not lose sight of herself after her channel became popular. For Katt Kartel, working towards authenticity has been a difficult journey due to offensive comments from viewers that affected her confidence:

Katt Kartel: I changed my accent, so people feel more comfortable because English isn't my native language and things like that. When you grow up in a not-so-nice area,

you talk like this. I feel like this started because I had a collab stream with some girls who were not from anywhere near my background and on their stream, their chat was hearing me, and they were making really triggering comments. They were saying, like, 'Who's that spicy this?' and 'feisty that' and 'Oh my God, who is that?' All that kind of stuff. So, I started to get self-conscious, almost like I needed to water myself down. I felt like I had to not curse or like things like that, but that's just not who I am... I lost myself because I was listening to too many voices from other people and what they thought, and I wasn't listening to me.

As a Latina streamer, Katt Kartel faced numerous comments about her identity, mocking her accent and making xenophobic and racist comments. In order to minimise this abusive behaviour from viewers, Katt changed the way she behaved on streams, working to appeal to viewers. By changing herself for her viewers, she was able to continue to stream, which she enjoyed, without having to manage harassing comments. However, the tension between feeling inauthentic versus abusive messages resulted in burnout for Katt, and she took an extended period of time away from Twitch. After a year-long break, Katt did return and changed her mindset about who she wanted to be on the platform- a move she describes as “self-love” and “putting myself first”. Instead of paying attention to abusive comments from the chat, she decided to behave in a way that felt truer to who she is, instead of altering her online self. Katt Kartel shows that her authentic self was policed by viewers, through racially loaded comments about her voice, and the way she spoke. As argued by Gray (2017), “because people of color are not recognized as legitimate participants in virtual spaces, disparaging realities exist leading to their exclusion and full participation in the community. No matter the content, the dominant culture of video gaming still gets to decide who is valid and who is not” (358). This demonstrates that authenticity is accepted and encouraged within limits, but only those dictated by the dominant culture on Twitch- that being US-centred and white. Further discussion around the culture on Twitch and the implications for those outwith its parameters can be found in the final data chapter that covers Gender (Chapter 3). Authenticity is a trait that Frazley views as being extremely important. Being transgender, she feels like she was not being fully authentic for much of her time on Twitch before she transitioned, but since coming out she has seen overwhelming support as she navigates this new stage of her life:

Frazley: It's something that I felt my stream had been missing for the longest time and it's because I wasn't being my authentic self. For me, it's about embracing who I am. I've had a lot of people say that they saw the mask I was wearing but ever since I've come out and been open and expressive, I have seen my engagement go way up. So, I think being authentic, being with your morals, speaking up on issues that are either maybe in our lane or out of our lane, like issues about race, about gender, about sexual orientation... I do try to be who I am, with all the cursing and everything. I'm the same person that I would be if I was allowed to be open in my day to day, because at work, I can't always be open. Even with family, I can't be fully open. I mean, I've had this discussion with my family that I'm actually more authentic streaming online than I am with them because they've put restrictions on who I can be.

Frazley’s response highlights how viewers were aware of her not being fully authentic on her streams. Frazley’s engagement increasingly significantly following her coming out could indicate that current viewers were able to connect more with her after she shared with them and so wanted to engage with her in the chat and support her channel. This increase could also be due to Twitch viewers seeking out content from someone who is transgender and is

also open about their transition and experiences so that they can become more educated on being transgender. As discussed by Persaud and Perks (2022), LGTBQIA+ streamers through their presence on Twitch provide “highly visible queer representation for their largely queer audiences”, presenting a “complicated relationship between representation, authenticity, and performance” (483). Thus, many LGTBQIA+ streamers may feel responsibility to represent their community and answer questions about their identity. Frazley also mentions that she feels more authentic on stream than she does offline and cites this as being due the ability to open about who she is in a way that she does not feel able to with her family. By building a supportive community around her who enjoy her authenticity, Frazley has created an environment in which she is applauded for being true to who she is, which she may not experience offline.

Inauthenticity on Twitch

Several participants discussed streamers that they consider to be inauthentic, due to them putting on a character or acting in accordance with what they believe their audience would want instead of their ‘true self’. Although most of the participants indicated that they do not enjoy or approve of streamers that they view to be putting on a character, some did acknowledge the effort it would take to act for such long periods of time. Frazley is not someone who enjoys character streamers on Twitch, as she views them as inauthentic:

Frazley: So, I think authenticity is important. You can be a character like Dr DisRespect but I see so much more benefit in expressing who the person is behind it ... If you express that character through who you are, and you're authentic there, it can work. I like being me and when you see me, this is who I am. I may not be using my legal name for what I do, but I'm still me 100%. I think somebody needs to see your morals and your ethics. They need to see your weaknesses and your strengths. They need to see who you are and you embracing that because otherwise it's fake. I despise Dr. Disrespect because I always see someone trying to be a character for the outrage and the drama.

Frazley references Dr DisRespect, a well-known streamer with millions of followers who puts on a character for each broadcast. Performing this character involves wearing a wig, sunglasses, and tactical vest, in combination with a “macho, over-the-top persona” (Partin, 2018). The view that Dr DisRespect is inauthentic seems to extend from the idea that he is not like this in ‘real life’ and has created this character to encourage controversy and attention. As described by Woodcock and Johnson (2019b) some streamers prefer to stream as a character, which allows them to “separate their off-stream and on-stream lives and thereby maintain greater control over their emotional labor” (818). Equally, it seems that streaming as a character also serves to mark out these streamers from others on the platform” (818). For Frazley however putting on a character and not sharing real-life vulnerabilities with the audience means that she cannot consider such streamers to be authentic. As discussed earlier in the chapter, being vulnerable with viewers is often seen as a key component of authenticity.

RGBabby also does not enjoy streamers who use a persona, although she notes that it is impressive to be able to perform in this way for such substantial amounts of time:

RGBabby: I know a lot of people can put on a persona for the internet and then be them on the side. And actually, kudos to people who do that because I think if you can put on a wig and make your voice high-pitched and keep that for a three-hour stream then you deserve your followers. That's so hard, I can't even imagine.

Whilst RGBabby acknowledges the work it would take to maintain a persona for such lengthy periods, she does question why people would seek out streamers who do so. Using Dr DisRespect again as an example of a streamer who puts on a persona, I found countless posts across social media platforms questioning his popularity, with many not understanding how people could enjoy watching someone who is very clearly performing as a character. However, across YouTube Gaming and Twitch, he has amassed millions of followers who evidently find his content entertaining. Social media responses to the many questions asking why people enjoyed Dr DisRespect's content included people finding him funny, enjoying how talented he is at the games he plays, and appreciating the high-quality stream and graphics. Overall, his success indicates that authenticity is far from the only factor that encourages viewers to watch a streamer. Furthermore, it is notable that the examples used by both Frazley and RGBabby both refer to hyperfeminine and hypermasculine (Salter and Blodgett, 2012) portrayals from streamers that are pushed to the forefront on Twitch. This reflects the work of Dargonaki (2018), adapting the work of Butler (2006), to argue that the "emphasis on the streamer's persona often results – at least in the most popular channels – in the performance of gender extremes" (108). Thus, from Frazley and RGBabby's responses, the degree to which individuals with hypermasculine and hyperfeminine "extreme" gender performance can be understood as authentic is limited "because they make visible the extensive- but ideally hidden- labour that goes into crafting" them (Nicholls, 2019: 199).

Like RGBabby, Alice finds little value in streamers who stream as a persona but also acknowledges that the line between being authentic and streaming as a character is not as clear cut as others might suggest:

Alice: I personally don't watch a lot of those streamers because I prefer genuine, relatable exchange. But I think to some degree everyone plays a character when they're on camera. I even saw it in myself that I warped some aspects of my personality in hopes to be more successful on Twitch.

Alice discusses how she notices herself putting on an act when streaming, in order to appeal to viewers, highlighting that there is not always a clear distinction between those who many perceive to be authentic and inauthentic. Chambourine takes this idea further, disagreeing with the idea that anyone who puts on a character can be deemed inauthentic:

Chambourine: People using personas and characters are still injecting their personality into it. Sure, they're not being their direct self but it's still a character created and enforced by their personality so, it's still them at the root of it.

Chambourine argues that streamers who put on a character when they stream can still be considered authentic, as they are building their persona around their 'real self' instead of creating a character from scratch, an idea recognised by Woodcock and Johnson (2019b) when they describe such streamers as a "character-based facet of themselves". Therefore, following this idea, no behaviour on Twitch can truly be considered completely inauthentic as in some manner it will indicate the streamer's beliefs, characteristics, or desires.

Jessica Price also discusses this blurring of lines between authentic and inauthentic, and during the interview realised that although she considered herself to be authentic, this may not be as true as she had initially thought:

Jessica Price: I was just telling you about how I want to be as authentic as possible, but when I'm on stream, I'm very aware that I'm on camera. I'm very aware that there are people on there who are friends but haven't seen the day that I've had, and I don't want to bring that energy onto a stream. So, maybe I'm not as authentic as I like to pretend I am ... For example, if you wanted this to be a career, you turn into an entertainer, you turn into this person that isn't necessarily as true to your principles as you like to be. For smaller streamers who are trying to keep up a level of engagement that they think is success, they do have to present themselves in a way that isn't necessarily a true reflection of what they are for on a day-to-day basis... With any social media, you get people presenting an image of themselves that they think is not just tolerable to people, but like people actively want to consume more of. It's almost like you make yourself a commodity, you make yourself a brand.

Jessica draws attention to the primary aim of streamers, which is to entertain their audiences. Streamers on Twitch may alter themselves to be as entertaining as possible, including acting in a way that may not feel aligned with their 'true self', as was discussed earlier in this chapter regarding emotional and affective labour. Jessica also discusses how people cultivate their online image on social media sites, in order to appeal to viewers and become a brand, including their personalities and experiences (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019b). Streamers on Twitch all create and design a profile for themselves on the platform which includes personal information, chat rules, links to other social media, often with professionally designed graphics. As such, each streamer is branding themselves through their channel, working to make their channel appeal to new viewers, and companies who may wish to sponsor them, forming elements of the affective labour of streamers, as well as aspirational labour (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019b). As streamers rely on their connections with their viewers to grow their channels through affective labour, and for those reaching Affiliate and Partner level, earning money, the relationships remain encapsulated by an economic or potential economic exchanges within the context of labour on Twitch. Therefore, although the exchanges with viewers are likely genuine, they are constrained by the time the streamer gives the exchange and is online, and that the connections are often mediated through direct donations, such as Twitch donor or subscriber alerts which show a short message to the streamer, or through the expectation that facilitating communication with viewers is seen as a necessary part of growing a Twitch channel (Johnson, 2021). The commodified persona of Twitch streamers will be discussed further in the next section of this chapter.

Chambourine also mentioned streamers who cultivate their online persona in order to appeal to viewers and highlights how this “*isn't good content*” but is done to make streaming their full-time career. During a follow-up conversation over Twitter, I asked Chambourine to expand on this point:

Chambourine: People start out with the goal of being a streamer as a job which warps their personality because they are trying to act the way they think their audience would like them to in order to create an income. Whereas most successful streamers, just turn on their stream and act the way they are. They pick up the audience as they go along ... Most audiences can tell when you're forcing it usually.

Both Jessica's and Chambourine's responses highlight that the bid for authenticity becomes more complex after streamers consider the growth of their channel and an obligation to stick to behaving in accordance with the way that inspired the increase in their audience and engagement. For streamers who have seen their channel grow exponentially, many may feel obligated to keep up a persona that was not fully authentic in order to keep growing their channel and maintain their current followers, who have expectations of how the streamer is likely to behave.

KaiJayne notes that many streamers, particularly when they are new to the platform, stream in a way that obscures their true self from their viewers:

KaiJayne: I feel like a lot of people put on a facade when they start streaming. It's like the 'start streaming' button is not only an on-switch for the stream, but an on switch for your persona. It's the reason why so many big content creators make alts ... They have alt accounts to stream on for when they're not feeling to stream on their main account. And if you go on these streams, you can tell it feels a lot more authentic, it feels a lot more personal.

KaiJayne mentions how some creators who put on a character when they stream create separate accounts or 'alts' for when they want to stream without their character. I found this to be particularly interesting as it was not something that I had come across as a lurker on Twitch. By creating such a clear distinction between their identities, this creates the impression that by streaming without the character, this separate account must be more authentic and truer to themselves. These alternative accounts allow streamers who are locked-in to a particular streaming style and specific content to stream more low-energy streams to a significantly smaller audience, perhaps streaming different games or 'Just Chatting'.

Authenticity and Money/ Sponsorships

As discussed earlier in this chapter, when it comes to authenticity on Twitch, one key factor to consider is the impact of money in how authenticity is produced by streamers. For streamers with large followings, particularly Twitch Partners, sponsorships are a significant part of earning money on the platform. Although streamers earn money from Twitch itself from the donations of bits and channel subscriptions, third-party companies may seek streamers as an avenue to advertise their products. Streamers, unlike traditional celebrities, are often seen as more relatable and living a life closer to that of their viewers and viewers may be more inclined to trust the opinions of streamers, including in the products that they advertise. Taking on a sponsorship can be a big decision for streamers, for example, partnering with a controversial company or one that is under considerable public scrutiny can result in viewers turning away from streamers for 'selling out'. As such, taking money from a company that is not in-line with either their own views or the interests of their viewers can be seen as inauthentic. Whilst third-party sponsorships come with challenges and difficult decisions for larger streamers, even small streamers can feel the pressure of money and how it affects their authenticity. Receiving donations with strings attached can leave streamers feeling obligated to carry out the wishes of the donor.

On Twitch, donations buy the streamer's time and attention. As it is common practice to thank each donor or subscriber to a channel, doing so will result in at least an acknowledgment of the viewer, if not an extended conversation. For streamers with big

followings, the donation and subscription messages can be very frequent, so these streamers may say thank you and quickly list several viewers at once in a joint message. Repeated donations and subscriptions can develop the relationship between viewers and streamers as the streamers start to learn regular viewers' names and interact with them more.

This was something I became aware of several years ago as a Twitch viewer. I found that I could use my Amazon account to get a free subscription to any Twitch channel and support them without any cost to me. This is sometimes referred to by streamers as 'taking money out of Bezos' pocket' due to the former Amazon owner, which owns Twitch, giving what is often viewed as free money towards a streamer. I gave my free subscription to a channel that I watched regularly, and my Twitch username was duly read out by the streamer. After several months of being a free Twitch Prime subscriber, the streamer started to reach out to me more during their streams, asking how I was doing, saying that I had been subscribed for a long time, ("Wow, has it been 6 months already?"), asking "Am I definitely pronouncing your username correctly?". Being one of thousands of viewers of this channel, I got to see first-hand how the exchange of money, even if it did not cost me anything, changed my relationship with the streamer. As a dedicated lurker in Twitch chat instead of regular commenter, I did not engage with the streamer further than this, and even felt somewhat exposed as one lone lurker in an audience of thousands. But for other users, becoming a regular opens up a different connection with the streamer based on familiarity and appreciation. By engaging more with streamers, through the use of donations, the streamer appeared more authentic through their casual conversation with them, and their seeming genuineness to develop the connection. However, ultimately all these exchanges are still mediated through the exchange of money or through aspirational earnings. And when my Twitch Prime ran out and I did not renew my subscription, my free subscription to that Twitch channel ended and I felt unexpectedly guilty. I questioned whether the attempts from the streamer to get me more involved in the channel were genuine or to encourage me to keep subscribing but found that either way, I did not mind.

For Katt Kartel, financial donations, although appreciated, have resulted in pressure from viewers:

Katt Kartel: I've had people trying to donate to you for their ulterior motives and stuff and all kinds of crazy stuff, too. It's really difficult. You can't just be yourself. Like, if somebody does something for you, you're questioning what you have to do for them now. When is the other shoe gonna drop? When is someone gonna start getting angry with you, because you're not giving them what they thought that they were paying for? It always feels like you're under a microscope. And that anything that you say or do, or don't say and don't do will be criticised and used against you.

In this quote, Katt Kartel indicates that the exchange of money on Twitch reduces her authenticity, describing how she feels bound by the wishes of the viewers, instead of being led by her own interests. Katt language reinforces the idea that Twitch is an environment in which every action is under scrutiny, both from the audience and from the streamer themselves. Her use of phrases like "*under a microscope*" further emphasises the sense of vulnerability that streamers may feel, as audience interactions become transactional, and driven by expectations, with financial consequences for deviation from such expectations. Through this precarious labour and in the neoliberal context of Twitch streaming, Katt highlights the constant pressure to conform to audience demands, which can lead to a loss of personal agency and creative freedom. This dynamic underscores the broader implications of

monetised digital labor, where the pursuit of authenticity is often at odds with the commercial realities of content creation.. As such, Katt must negotiate the boundaries between authenticity and financial gain, considering her precarity in this “hyper-individualistic and competitive” environment (Zorlu and Özkan, 2020: 114).

Arthremis has built a following of over 2,000 people by streaming horror games and one of the challenges for Arthremis when growing their channel was managing sponsorships and the decisions that must be made around which ones to accept:

Arthremis: I never tried to put out content that I'm not actually interested in... A lot of streamers go for sponsorships: people give you money, you plug the product, or you play the video game. But if somebody was to give me money to play FIFA, I'm never going to say yes to that because it's not something I can actually talk about. It's nothing that I've already talked about and it's nothing that my community is interested in. Why would I try and sell something to my community that I wouldn't even buy myself? So, if people come to me because they trust my opinions on things, I don't want to start essentially selling out.

For Arthremis, being authentic involves advertising companies that they actually support, instead of taking any financial opportunity offered to them. As discussed by McRae (2017) in their work on bloggers and sponsorships, “Monetizing persona work is a particularly difficult terrain” for content creators due to the importance given to authenticity in regard to their work and their self-branding (22). By taking on paid advertisements, viewers become suspicious of the creator’s authenticity as it pulls back the curtain on how the advertisement is for money, which is earned through labour on Twitch, and thus the streamer may not be authentic in streaming for their own enjoyment and instead they are motivated only by the money.

Like Arthremis, Radderss carefully considers advertisements and sponsorships and how they would impact her authenticity. As such, she only accepts those in accordance with her personal values. As a result, she has had to turn down opportunities, forgoing financial benefits in order to stay authentic:

Radderss: My morals are staunchly in the equality, anti-capitalism kind of area and when I've had offers from companies who want to give me money to promote them on my stream, if I know that company has been embroiled in quite a scandal in which they did a really shitty thing, I refuse. I know I need the money, but I personally can't do things that are completely against who I am as a person for money. And for some people, authenticity isn't necessarily sticking to your morals, but just being upfront. You know, some people are like, 'I don't really feel like I need to stick to morals, like my morals are kind of like a grey area for me', which is fine. Everybody has their own moral compass. And they may be like, 'I'll do this thing for money. I don't really care' but then say, 'I'll do this thing for money. I don't really care'. Everyone's authenticity to themselves is different. Unfortunately, for my financial situation, my bank is like, 'Please, please just sacrifice your morals', and I'm like, 'I'm gonna sacrifice my dinner instead'.

Radderss discusses the difficulty in navigating sponsorships from companies and the conflict with authenticity that this causes, including moral implications (Grgurić Čop, 2024). Although she discusses the ways in which other streamers take on sponsorships from companies that they might not agree with by being transparent and honest with their viewers,

for Radders this is not an option as she does not feel that this is an area in which she can compromise as her understanding of her own authenticity grounds the decisions she makes regarding earning money. Radders' response demonstrates how she considers trust with her audience to be of vital importance, as going against her principles for financial opportunities would also damage her relationships with her viewers. In order to ensure that opportunities she takes on align with her views and her brand as a streamer Radders says that she undertakes "*a lot of soul searching*" when it comes to the companies that she will work with. This is particularly pertinent when considering the financial instability faced by many streamers, with decisions around sponsorships requiring a negotiation between personal values, audience trust, and financial stability.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the ways in which authenticity forms part of the streamer experience on Twitch. Through building understandings of how women and non-binary streamers view and utilise authenticity, and the conscious and unconscious practices that shape behaviour on the platform, this chapter has demonstrated that authenticity can be seen as a fundamental aspect of Twitch streaming, and participants consistently stressed its importance to creating meaningful relationships with their viewers. At the same time, the portrayal of authenticity on a social media platform such as Twitch, with a financial component, that comes from subscriptions and donations, inevitably creates paradoxes, contradictions, and tensions. This can include the balance between streamers acting in accordance with their 'true self' with catering to viewer expectations. Participants described the difficulty they faced with managing their desire for authenticity with the need to provide entertainment and cultivate their brand as part of the aspirational labour they undertake as streamers. This tension sometimes manifests in streamers feeling pressured to perform or curate their content in a specific way due to precarious labour of streamers in which they must try to appeal to viewers in order to find success, and stability on Twitch (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019b), potentially leading to a loss of authenticity. Other obstacles in the desire to be authentic on Twitch come from the impact of money and sponsorships. Whilst such opportunities provide streamers with significant financial benefits, streamers also have to consider how taking on such opportunities affects their authenticity, particularly when the brands do not align with their own values and interests. Despite these tensions, participants demonstrated that feeling and being viewed as authentic plays a crucial part in the connections they develop with their viewers.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to examine the relationships that form between streamers and their viewers, with a focus on women and non-binary streamers. This research stands as the first exploration that examines the relationships between streamers and their viewers by unifying and critically examining the intersections of gender, labour, intimacy, boundaries, and authenticity. By bringing together these interrelated themes, this research unveils the multifaceted nature of these relationships and offers new understandings of the personal and professional connections made on Twitch, alongside the challenges that such relationships present.

This thesis first outlined the existing literature and contributions that informed this research in *Chapter 1: Literature Review*. This chapter highlights the key themes that relate to the research, including digital labour, co-presence, and online communities. Examination of these themes built a foundation for understanding the multifaceted nature of interactions on Twitch and across social media more broadly. This review also demonstrates the current gaps in the bodies of literature for which this research seeks to contribute, particularly regarding the study of personal relationships within livestreaming platforms such as Twitch, alongside considerations of the factors that impact these relationships.

Chapter 2: Methods discussed the methods and approaches adopted for this research. The data for this thesis was collected in the spring of 2021, in the form of semi-structured interviews, conducted with 32 participants. All the interviews for this research were conducted over Zoom and were transcribed and analysed thematically, allowing for key themes to arise from the data. A key element of this research was the approach which aimed to centre the experiences of participants (Potts et al., 2022), building upon their understandings and definitions, and allowing them to draw my attention towards new themes and ideas, as well as the adoption of a Marxist feminist approach, drawing attention towards the ways in which digital labour can be exploited (Cruz, 2018). This chapter also discussed the use of ‘lurking’ as a way of gathering observational data, in addition to a detailed discussion about the interviews.

Chapter 3: Gender and ‘Toxic Technocultures’ on Twitch examined the impact of gender identity (Butler, 2006) and performance on Twitch, and how gender is policed on the platform. The chapter delves into the misogynistic culture prevailing on Twitch and its roots in the broader gaming culture, highlighting the exclusion of marginalised groups, including women, Black people, and LGBTQIA+ people from gaming culture (Massanari, 2017; Zolides, 2021). Additionally, the chapter focuses on the expectations of women and non-binary streamers regarding their appearance, clothing, and behaviour while streaming, such as the pressure participants felt to conform to cultural norms enforced by viewers (Kondakciu et al., 2021). For transgender and non-binary streamers, the pressure can be compounded as they struggle for respect of their gender identity, which can hinge on how they present themselves to the audience on the platform (Persaud and Perks, 2022: 483). The chapter also encompasses discussions about the experience of marginalisation, misogyny, racism, and transphobia faced by participants (Nadal et al., 2012; Powell et al., 2020). Throughout this section, I felt it was essential to capture the diverse perspectives of all participants, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their experiences are understood. By exploring the voices of the participants and the impact of gender identity, the data highlights how such scrutiny and abusive behaviour from viewers towards women and non-binary streamers places limits on

the extent to which they can forge meaningful connections with their audience and be authentic on the platform; this provides awareness of the challenging dynamics present in Twitch streaming, whilst also emphasising the need for inclusive and supportive digital spaces.

Chapter 4: The Labour of Twitch Streamers examined the labour of Twitch streamers. Streamers' labour involves building communities, encouraging participation from viewers, and expanding their viewership on and off of the platform. With most participants having other jobs outside of Twitch, finding a balance between paid employment, free time and Twitch was a crucial issue addressed in interviews. Streaming can also be understood as "aspirational labour" (Duffy, 2015), for which individuals work towards potential, rather than present earnings and "affective labour" (Hardt and Negri, 2004) in order to encourage positive emotions from viewers and meet their expectations. As such, the focus remains on opportunities such as sponsorships, monetisation, and other financial gains in the future, while most streamers earn little to no money. The labour that streamers undertake impacts the dynamics of their relationships with viewers on Twitch, particularly when considering how success on the platform is closely tied to the relationships with viewers (Raun, 2018: 99) and this thesis paid close attention to the emotional and affective labour involved in streaming. With the data discussed in this chapter, this thesis stands to contribute new understandings of the labour of streamers in participatory online communities, highlighting how streamers not only produce content for their viewers, but through their labour, forge meaningful relationships with their communities on Twitch.

Chapter 5: Intimacy, Co-Presence, and Community on Twitch focused on the intimacy in relationships between Twitch streamers and their viewers. This chapter covered themes of parasocial relationships, where viewers develop one-sided connections with streamers; closeness and friendship among streamers and viewers, including hierarchical perceptions (Jamieson 2005); co-presence in virtual spaces (Zhao and Elesh 2008); fostering connectedness and community; and self-disclosure, support, and care (Jamieson, 2005; Derlega, 1984), in order to develop a sense of acknowledgement and belonging. The chapter demonstrates how Twitch offers an environment in which to cultivate intimate online relationships, and the subsequent challenges which come with communicating virtually. In this chapter, I aimed to encapsulate the complex and varying understandings that streamers held about the relationships they have with their viewers, including the limitations on the intimacy that can be developed. This chapter serves as a crucial exploration of how intimacy is developed in this digital setting and provides new insights into the ways in which streamers develop relationships in this online environment. A key element of this chapter involved extending the work of Jamieson (2011), bringing understandings of the practices that build intimacy to a live, digital setting.

Chapter 6: Building and Maintaining Boundaries on Twitch focused on the boundaries set by streamers, particularly within a context of rampant online abuse and harms, and the reasons why such boundaries are necessary. In this chapter, various online harms faced by streamers are discussed, in particular the trolling and abuse that is prevalent on the platform (Karhulahti, 2016). Given threats to the wellbeing and safety of streamers, including emotional harms from abuse, boundaries are something that are implemented by streamers to protect themselves, and are enforced by moderators and rule-setting. This chapter illustrated the important role played by moderators in the maintenance of boundaries, forming closer relationships with the streamers and being responsible for upholding the values that they hope to hold for their community. Finally, this chapter discussed the criticisms and suggestions

offered by participants on Twitch functions and policies, with the aim of drawing attention to the ways in which the platform could do more to better protect all users. Through analysis of the boundaries that are implemented and maintained by streamers, this thesis offers insights into how implementation of moderators, chat rules, and limiting self-disclosure each play a vital role in forming an environment in which close relationships between streamers and their viewers can develop.

Chapter 7: Performing Authenticity: The Challenges, Tensions and Paradoxes of Being Authentic on Twitch examines the portrayal and expectations surrounding authenticity on Twitch. All of the interviewees touched upon the concept of being authentic and the pressure they feel to portray themselves in an authentic manner, while simultaneously analysing the challenges that prevent them from feeling genuine and being perceived as such. As streamers cultivate their online profiles, they become public figures, gaining a following not just on Twitch but across a range of social media platforms. In this context, authenticity is viewed as essential to many streamers' work on Twitch and the participants' definitions of authenticity served as the foundation for this chapter. As such, this chapter discussed the key themes of performing authenticity and the value of being authentic. It also explored the challenges that come with being authentic, such as understanding inauthenticity, including streaming in character on Twitch, and the impact of paid subscriptions, tips, and donations on the relationships between the streamer and viewers. In this chapter, this data highlights how authenticity forms an essential component in the relationships between streamers and their viewers (Kondakciu et al., 2022) and provides new understandings of how they form meaningful relationships on the platform, alongside challenges from the financial component of streaming, personal safety, and showing vulnerability.

Implications for Research

The experiences of women and non-binary Twitch streamers are a critical area of research, as they face a myriad of challenges and obstacles that can have significant implications on the wellbeing of the broader streaming community. One of the most pressing issues facing these streamers is internet abuse, which can take many forms, including harassment, doxxing, often incorporating misogyny and transphobia. Such abuses can have a deeply damaging impact on the mental health and safety of women and non-binary streamers, driving them away from the platform and perpetuating the “toxic technocultures” (Massanari, 2017) that pervade the platform and other gaming-centred sites. Such abuse experienced by participants is described throughout this thesis, most prominently in the chapter on Boundaries (Chapter 6).

The pervasive nature of the misogyny and transphobia on Twitch, with many streamers facing discrimination and hate speech on a regular basis, impacts not only the individuals who are targeted, but also undermines the inclusivity and diversity of the platform overall, making it more difficult for marginalised communities to participate. Efforts from Twitch such as *Pride Month*, *Women's History Month*, and *Black History Month* highlight the work of marginalised creators on the platform but also push them into the spotlight, opening them up for further attacks, without receiving additional support. As a result of such challenges, there is a pressing need for platforms to take responsibility and enact policies aimed at protecting women and non-binary streamers. New policies may include greater moderation and enforcement efforts to prevent abuse, targeted support and resources for marginalised streamers, and broader initiatives aimed at promoting diversity and inclusivity on the platform. Overall, research on the experiences of women and non-binary Twitch streamers is

essential for understanding the scope and magnitude of these challenges and to identify effective interventions to promote a safer, more inclusive streaming environment.

Further research

This thesis offers a valuable contribution to the fields of gender, relationships, and technology studies, as well as adding to the growing body of literature on streaming. This research placed a focus on the intersection of gender and technology, and the ways in which women and non-binary streamers navigate building relationships with viewers on the platform, discussing key themes of gender intimacy, boundaries, and authenticity. These themes present many opportunities for future research that can expand upon and deepen the findings of this thesis.

The theme of gender is central to the thesis and provides an opportunity for further intersectional analysis. Future research can examine how gender interacts with other marginalised characteristics, such as race, sexuality, and disability, in ways that this thesis did not have the scope to cover in depth, identifying how intersections shape experiences and opportunities within the world of Twitch streaming. Furthermore, the theme of intimacy provides an important opportunity for future exploration. By examining the ways intimacy is developed and maintained through Twitch streaming, researchers can begin to build upon understandings of virtual intimacy and its implications for interpersonal relationships, particularly when considering the live nature of streaming, and the ability for synchronous communication between streamers and viewers. Similarly, the theme of boundaries presents opportunities for further examination. This thesis emphasises the importance of setting boundaries, particularly to mitigate online harms, and so future research can expand upon how boundary-setting varies, particularly regarding gender, and the ways it is negotiated in relation to building authentic yet commercial relationships on the platform. Finally, authenticity is a theme that has been explored extensively, including in the realm of social media and virtual communities, however future research on authenticity and Twitch streaming can build upon this foundation to better understand how authenticity is constructed and interpreted within this context, particularly considering the commodification of personality on Twitch (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019b) and how authenticity intersects with gendered expectations placed upon streamers. Additionally, as this research was limited to the analysis of experiences within the Global North, further research could examine streamers from different countries, as well as the impact of language and cultures outwith the Global North, on community-building on Twitch and similar platforms. In conclusion, the thesis, which examines the work of women and nonbinary Twitch streamers, provides an important foundation for future research across a wide range of areas of study. I hope that further investigations can build upon this initial study on livestreaming and relationships and deepen understandings across disciplines and digital platforms.

Appendix: Information Sheet



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
School of Social and
Political Science

Information: Examining the relationship between women and non-binary people who stream on Twitch and their viewers

My name is Eva Duncanson, and I am conducting research about Twitch.

You have been contacted because I am looking to interview and people who work/have worked as a streamer on Twitch.

This study aims to examine the relationships between women who stream on Twitch and their viewers to develop a greater understanding of how streamers and their viewers interact.

This will involve listening to the experiences of streamers about the streaming industry, how viewers participate, and why they choose this form of entertainment. This research is important as it aims to understand an activity which has seen little academic focus.

Please take time to read the following information carefully and if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information, please contact Eva Duncanson using the provided contact information. This research is a key part of my postgraduate degree in Sociology, a subject which tries to understand the social world. I will be using this data to write a PhD thesis on this topic. The data will be an important part of my research and information may be used in future academic articles.

Interviews will be recorded via a digital recorder. They will be typed up by Eva Duncanson and kept on a University server and protected by a password only accessible by the researcher. Your contribution can be kept confidential if required. Quotes will be used within the dissertation and in future articles. If participants would prefer to be kept anonymous, all contributions will be attributed to an alias, and no identifiable information included.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any of the questions and are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. This includes having your data removed from the researcher's records if you so wish. By sharing your experiences with us, you will be helping myself and social science to better understand the streaming industry. This in turn will contribute to understandings online communities, intimacy, and identity. There are no significant risks associated with participation.

If you give permission, you may be contacted again by the research in the future. This is optional and is indicated by ticking the appropriate box on the consent form.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Eva Duncanson
University of Edinburgh

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Edinburgh University Research Ethics Board. If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please contact:

Eva Duncanson

You can also contact Eva Duncanson's supervisors:

Professor Lynn Jamieson

Dr Angus Bancroft

Dr Holly Davis

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