TWITCH STREAMERS AND THE PLATFORMIZATION OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING COMPLEMENTARY LABOR IN THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the School of Journalism and Communication
and the Division of Graduate Studies of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

September 2022

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: Twitch Streamers and the Platformization of Cultural Production: Understanding Complementary Labor in the Creative Economy

This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy, Media and Communication Studies degree in the School of Journalism and Communication by:

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Degree awarded September 2022.

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy
School of Journalism and Communication
September 2022

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Twitch and other social media platforms allow a handful of content creators to act as social media influencers who perform complementary labor that advances their careers while also creating monetary and social value for Twitch by managing relationships with their fans, the platforms, as well as commercial sponsors and advertisers. Streamers who are the best at catering to Twitch's primary audience of young white males are more likely to be permitted frictionless entry into the advertising marketplace by the platform and by sponsors. Conversely, streamers with marginalized identities are frequently denied these same opportunities because they are often targeted with malicious harassment known as hate raids that makes brands and sponsors uncomfortable. Through two comparative case studies using inductive critical discourse analysis as well as platformization and cultural industries theoretical frameworks, this dissertation catalogs evidence of how Twitch's professional relationship with a streamer is largely dependent on the streamer's perceived brand friendliness, which can be understood as the type of user-engagement they tend to attract.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am so thankful to everyone who has helped me along my dissertation journey. To Hope, thank you for always supporting me and for being the first person that I explain my ideas to… and for watching all of the unhinged Twitch streams with me. I love you. To Dr. Cote, I cannot put into words how much your mentorship has meant to me and it is no understatement to say that I wouldn't be here without you tearing apart every draft I have ever sent you. To Dr. Chavez, thank you for always being the one to pull me out of the field and to see the forest for the trees when honing my arguments. A big shoutout to my family, including my Dad and Grandpa who have always been there to help me, as well as to my Mom and Grandma who are watching over me. Finally, thank you to my feline support squad, including Kiki, Twitch, and Stonks. Stonks was the most interested in my research and he 'helped' me write at my desk every day, so he is an expert on platformization theory as well.

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CHAPTER 1

Networked Communities: How Influencers Developed in the Gaming Industry

My dissertation argues that social media influencers on Twitch perform various forms of complementary labor that support the company's mission to add new users and attract new sponsors. Complementary labor is a term from platformization theory[1] that I adapted to describe how the cumulative effect of a streamer's labor sustains their own career while simultaneously complementing the platform's growth. I draw from both platformization and cultural industries theories to explore the limits of this complementary labor as well as the relationship between the corporate livestreaming platform and the influencers who produce content. Through two inductive thematic analysis case studies, I offer concrete evidence that a streamer's perceived brand friendliness is heavily contingent on the types of engagement they attract from audiences, so that streamers who complement Twitch's growth and relationship with advertisers are offered frictionless entry into its marketplace. If a streamer is permitted frictionless entry, then it can also be inferred that they are perceived as brand friendly in that sponsors are willing to be associated with that streamer's content. As of 2018 Twitch's user base is overwhelmingly made up of white males aged 16-34 (Twitch, 'Advertising', n.d.; Yosilewitz, 2018), so streamers who cater to that demographic are the most likely to be permitted frictionless entry into Twitch's marketplace to do complementary labor that draws new users and audiences to Twitch's platform.

Conversely, streamers from marginalized communities are often victimized by targeted harassment which threatens the streamer's perceived brand friendliness that denies them frictionless entry into Twitch's market. As a researcher, I am one of Twitch's primary audiences because I am a 30 year old heterosexual white man, which informs my perspective on this research. I have been a gamer my entire life and cannot remember a time without having a

[1] This term will be discussed at length in Chapter 2, but I developed 'complementary labor' from research on platformization from software studies and business studies which used the term to frame the economic relationship between third party entrepreneurs and platform companies (Bodle, 2011; Bucher, 2013; Reider & Sire, 2014)

computer with internet access as well as video game consoles at home. This access has shaped my identity but has also given me an intimate understanding of the gaming communities that I study today. However, during my graduate studies I began exploring research on video game and internet studies, which directed my attention toward critical and feminist scholarship that interrogates power imbalances and inequity in these digital workplaces. These dual perspectives as an avid gamer and a critical media industries scholar inform my research on social media influencers on Twitch who perform complementary labor.

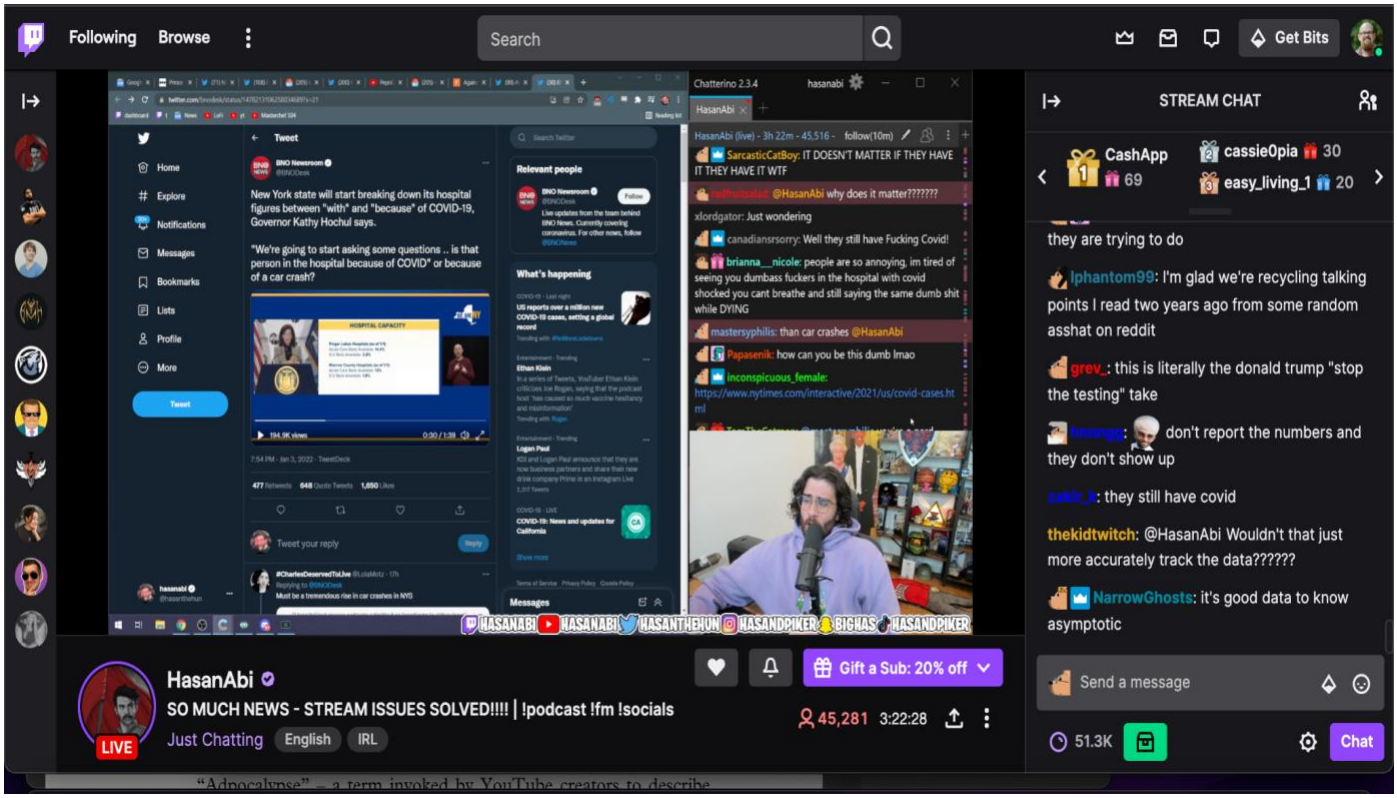

Figure 1

User's view of a Twitch broadcast. The left side of the screen is dedicated to whatever the streamer is broadcasting. The broadcast displays the entertaining activity, where the bottom right shows a live video feed of the streamer. This video feed is crucial because it displays the live interaction between the streamer and their audience in the chatroom on the right, this collective audience is referred to as Chat.

My graduate education coincided with my introduction to the livestreaming platform Twitch in 2015. A friend of mine suggested tuning into one of his favorite streamers as ambient noise in our study room and I was immediately hooked. For those who are unfamiliar, Twitch is a livestreaming platform that allows people to use a webcam and a screen share feature so that audiences can watch the streamer's face as well as their on-screen activity at the same time (Figure 1, above). Each broadcast includes a dedicated chatroom so that audiences can communicate with both the streamer and each other in real time. The ability to view the streamer's on-screen activity, their reactions to said activity, and synchronous chat rooms effectively make Twitch streams an interactive and immersive experience that encourages audiences to feel as if they're members of a community. These issues will be explored further, but for now it is important to understand that these immersive streams establish loyal audiences who often return to their favorite Twitch streamer's channel, which is inherently valuable to companies like Twitch that rely primarily on ad revenue.

As a critical media industries and digital labor scholar, much of my research investigates discursive power relationships between media producers performing the labor and the organizations that commodify it. Twitch is increasingly becoming a nexus where influencers work to simultaneously meet the needs and expectations of the platform, their fans, as well as potential sponsors. For example, Tyler 'Ninja' Blevins is one of the most popular streamers on Twitch whose turned his Fortnite gameplay into a business empire. Part of Blevins' commercial success is because he has a loyal audience of millions of followers who repeatedly consume his content, which is a form of complementary labor that is valuable to both Twitch and advertisers. Blevins' ability to materialize multimillion dollar contracts with Twitch, the now defunct Mixer, as well as brands like Red Bull and Adidas are all evidence of his frictionless entry into the

Twitch marketplace and is one of the reasons why I am interested in Twitch as a topic of study. What is unique about streamers like Belvins who are achieving unprecedented success while hundreds of thousands of other streamers have failed to replicate? Answering questions like these, as well as issues of power, exploitation, and digital labor, reflect my interest in Twitch as a critical media industries scholar, leading to the following research questions that guided my dissertation research:

RQ 1- How do influencers navigate the demands of the Twitch platform, sponsors and advertisers, and their communities?

RQ 2 - How do successful influencers complement the platform logics of Twitch

I offer a more nuanced theoretical definition of platforms and platform logics in the second chapter, but they can briefly be understood as corporate owned and managed digital infrastructures that facilitate user interactions with matchmaking algorithms (Srnicek, 2017). These corporations, and their digital infrastructures, collect user data from each of these interactions and sell them to advertisers (Fuchs et al., 2013). In order to answer these research questions, the remainder of this chapter reviews Twitch's trajectory as a company and its role as an Amazon subsidiary, followed by a summary of the relationship between Twitch as a company and the content creators who monetize their labor on it.

Understanding Twitch as an Amazon LLC. Subsidiary

What would become Twitch in 2011 originated as Justin.tv in 2005 (Streamer's Playbook, n.d.). The start-up livestreaming service successfully reduced the cost of one hour of streaming to under a penny, thus allowing the service to sustain itself through ad revenue generated from viewers (Rice, 2012). Twitch has quietly grown since it was acquired by Amazon for more than $1 billion in 2014 (Lopez, 2014), solidifying its dominance over social

livestreaming in the social media entertainment industry (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). For some perspective, audiences viewed more than 192 billion minutes of livestreams on Twitch in 2014; by 2019, that number had grown to 660 billion minutes (Twitch Advertising "Audience", n.d.). This pattern of growth made Twitch one of the most popular livestreaming platforms in the United States before the Covid-19 pandemic, but since 2020 they have continued their exponential growth. These metrics underscore Twitch's reliance on ad revenue. For example, Twitch reports on its 'Our Audience' page intended for potential commercial advertisers that in 2020, more than 13 million people streamed for the first time, that audiences watched over 1 trillion minutes of live broadcasts, with 30 million average daily visitors and over 7 million unique streamers broadcasting every month. (Twitch Advertising "Audience", n.d.).

The platform sporadically publishes self-reported statistics but exact revenue statements or audience metrics have been impossible to verify outside of occasional news stories with unnamed sources (Anand, 2020) or website tracker services like TwitchMetrics, SullyGnome, or SocialBlade that project estimates. That being said, Priya Anand reported that Twitch generated $230 million in ad revenue in 2018, falling short of Amazon's "internal goal for the year of between $500 million and $600 million dollars" (2020). While this number is infantile compared to YouTube's estimated $11 billion in ad revenue in 2018 (Ceci, 2021), it frames Twitch as an important platform that monetizes relationships with streamers, end-users, advertisers, as well as endemic businesses like game developers and esports organizers within Amazon's overall business empire.

While this topic can be approached from a number of theoretical and methodological perspectives, I'm specifically interested in the symbiotic relationship between Twitch, streamers, and advertisers. Amazon/Twitch profits primarily from delivering consumers to marketers,

streamers are responsible for producing the livestreams where audiences watch ads. When platforms primarily profit from advertising, they are subsequently reliant on streamers and other content creators for "filling out" their platform with content that attracts audiences and users (Rice, 2012). This requires platforms like Twitch and YouTube to offer creators additional monetization offerings (Postigo, 2016; Partin, 2020), like ad share programs that give a percentage of the ad revenue with the streamer. As these corporate-owned platforms maneuver and compete with each other, it creates opportunities for entrepreneurial content creators to monetize their productive labor across multiple platforms within the creator economy like Twitch, YouTube, and Instagram. However, Twitch retains the ability to structure and modify these monetization offerings at the company's convenience, giving them tremendous power over creators while simultaneously being contingent on their original content.

How Streamers use Twitch's monetization offerings

Twitch offers clear paths for aspirational streamers to monetize their labor. The first step is for streamers to reach 'Affiliate' status, which requires streamers to stream at least seven times for at least 500 minutes with at least 3 concurrent viewers in a month, as well as to accumulate 50 followers (Twitch, "Affiliate Program", n.d.). Twitch allows Affiliates to earn money through user donations and subscriptions, as well as sharing ad revenue. Affiliates can continue growing their communities and eventually apply to the 'Partner' program after completing the "Path to Partner Achievement" that requires streamers to broadcast themselves for at least 25 hours, over at least 12 days, while averaging at least 75 concurrent viewers during a 30-day period (Twitch, "Partner" n.d.).

Twitch's standards for inclusion may seem low, but this is the bare minimum for streamers to have the *ability* to monetize their content with no guarantee of actually making

money. However, once accepted, partners are then offered the full suite of monetization products, including donations, channel subscriptions, and ads to name a few. Twitch allows users to exchange legal currency for platform currency, “bits”, that viewers use to make donations and pay for animated “Cheers” that draw the streamer’s attention (Figure 2 below). 100 Bits costs $1.40 and 25,000 bits costs $308.00. Similarly, users can subscribe to streamers for Tier 1 at $4.99 a month, Tier 2 at $9.99 a month, and Tier 3 $24.99, a month. These monetization offerings show that streamers with large followings can generate sizable incomes through audience-support, even though Twitch collects roughly half of all subscriptions, and ad revenue (Fairfax, 2022).

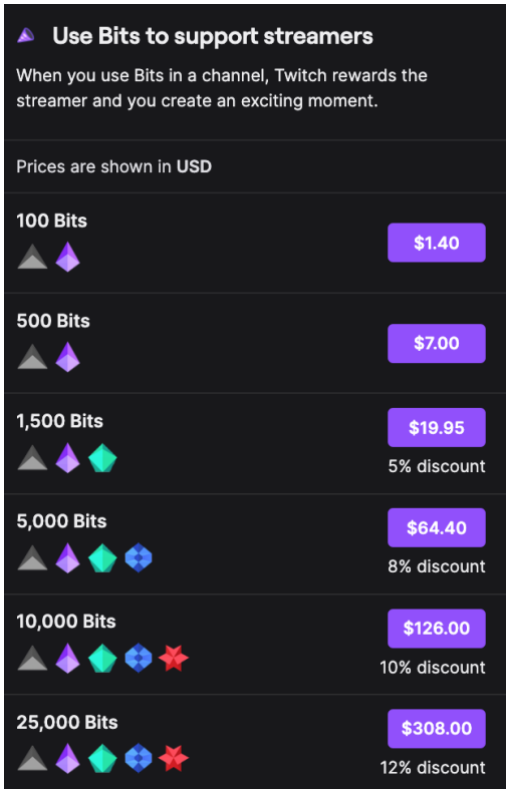

Figure 2

Twitch bits that fans can purchase to use to ‘cheer’ and are an effective way for audiences to get the streamer’s attention in chatrooms with thousands of other people.

There is considerably less detail when it comes to describing how partners should navigate deals with potential sponsors, claiming that it is the streamers' responsibility to arrange these opportunities. The company explains that sponsors are essentially exchanging product exposure for payment and that "the key is finding a sponsorship that fits you and your personal brand" without "compromis[ing] your beliefs or passions - more opportunities await around every corner" (Twitch, "Sponsorships", n.d.). All of this is to say that Twitch requires significant initial labor from streamers before they have the ability to even make money, but also that they must continue this labor for their earnings to be significant.

I want to reiterate that a streamer's paycheck depends largely on their ability to simultaneously navigate economic and social relationships with their audience, Twitch, as well as multiple third-party advertisers and sponsors. This means that streamers are constantly navigating multiple economic relationships through a combination of donations and subscriptions from fans, ad-share revenue payments from Twitch, as well as third-party sponsors from brands. While there are 27,000 streamers in Twitch's Partner program (Twitch, "Partner Program", n.d.), a hacked list of streamer payouts from August 2019 through October 2021 confirmed that only the top 81 most followed streamers were paid over $1 million by Twitch in that period (Miceli, 2021; Figure 3, below). These payouts were not publicly advertised but could be roughly calculated by multiplying $4.99 for each of the streamer's subscribers, but this report did not include information on how much money streamers made from third party sponsors or income from other social media profiles. However, the fact that less than 81 streamers out of 27,000 Partnered streamers demonstrates the hypercompetitive and precarious conditions that aspirational streamers contend with.

Rank	Twitch Streamer	Total Payout from August 2019 until October 2021
1	CriticalRole	$9,626,712.16
2	xQcOW	$8,454,427.17
3	summit1g	$5,847,541.17
4	Tfue	$5,295,582.44
5	NICKMERCS	$5,096,642.12
6	ludwig	$3,290,777.55
7	TimTheTatman	$3,290,133.32
8	Altoar	$3,053,839.94
9	auronplay	$3,053,341.54
10	LIRIK	$2,984,653.70
11	__unknown__	$2,863,780.63
12	Gaules	$2,844,985.18
13	HasanAbi	$2,810,480.11
14	Asmongold	$2,551,618.73
15	loltyler1	$2,490,584.90
16	RanbooLive	$2,401,021.84
17	MontanaBlack88	$2,391,369.58
10000000	KnowNothingTV	$0.00
18	ibai	$2,314,485.53
19	Castro_1021	$2,311,021.81
20	MOONMOON	$2,236,043.55
21	TheRealKnossi	$2,157,258.23
22	moistcr1tikal	$2,098,742.63
23	Mizkif	$2,086,548.21
24	CohhCarnage	$2,061,059.29
25	shroud	$2,040,503.15

Figure 3

Twitch payouts to top 25 streamers from August 2019 - October 2021.

As these handful of streamers continue growing their fanbases, they will become increasingly valuable to sponsors and advertisers seeking exposure for their products. This also makes these streamers increasingly valuable to Twitch and they are offered exclusivity contracts or are invited to participate in Twitch-branded events and promotional activities. The next chapter reviews what platform theorists have described as ‘complementors’ as a framework for theorizing that streamers who are either the most appealing to Twitch’s core audience demographic of white males age 16-34 (Twitch Advertising, n.d.; Yosilewitz, 2018). Streamers who are the most effective at entertaining this demographic are then more likely to be permitted

frictionless entry into Twitch's marketplace by both Twitch and advertisers, which in turn advances a streamer's career while creating value for both Twitch and its sponsors. This theory is reinforced further by the fact that of the top 50 highest paid streamers on Twitch, 48 out of 50 were male outside of the only two women, Pokimane and Amouranth (Miceli, 2021). This discrepancy inspired my idea for comparative case studies, which is why Chapters 3 and 4 investigate the conditions of and limitations of complementary labor that affect creators differently according to their identities. Specifically, I will discuss how Twitch's decision to cater to the gaming community and its reliance on ad revenue models both pressure the company to assimilate male streamers who fit within what has historically been considered the core gaming demographic (Cote, 2020), while ignoring streamers from marginalized communities.

However, before discussing platformization theory as a framework for understanding how ad revenue models can be exclusionary, I need to explain how the digital innovations have enabled new forms of community, which have then been commodified by the game industry. Therefore, the next section summarizes a brief historical overview of how the game industry eventually embraced and integrated online and networked features into their products, which coincided with the proliferation of new ICTs that enabled gamers to produce their own content. This continues developing the fundamental understanding of the innovation and commodification in the gaming industry, which will be further enriched by a review of literature on social media influencers and immaterial labor to demonstrate why influential content creators are so valuable to both platforms like Twitch as well as other businesses within the AAA games industry.

Literature Review

Networked game industry

Even though I am analyzing gaming influencers and the video game industry, I am only using them as an example to frame the larger discussion about platformization. Therefore, it isn't necessary to summarize the historical development of the gaming industry when game studies scholars have already written these comprehensive histories of the global gaming industry. For example, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's (2009) *Games of Empire* reviews the gaming industry's complicated relationship with the defense industry while explaining the political, cultural, and material consequences of the neoliberal industry. T.L. Taylor's (2009) *Play Between Worlds* explains the historical development of the gaming industry from an exclusive hobby for computer scientists in university labs, to the rise of popular arcades, to the introduction of home consoles. Finally, Aphra Kerr's (2017) *Global Games* documents how mobile games that are played on smartphones and social media platforms have restructured the global game industry by allowing Chinese and European companies to enter the industry that had long been dominated by American and Japanese firms.

That being said, I am interested in the early 2000s when the game industry adapted to the internet which fundamentally changed how people played video games, seen through the initial development of early networked game genres, and the explosive popularity of massively multiplayer online role-playing games. These moments are useful for showing how advances in ICTs allowed gamers to establish global communities and that these communities were well positioned to utilize new social media platforms to produce and distribute their own content. This highlights that innovation and commodification have always been present in the U.S. video game industry, but that this has rapidly intensified through the popularity of influential Twitch streamers.

Introduction of Online Multiplayer Games

The video game industry was drastically affected by two genres of games that utilized network access in their games, First-Person Shooters and Multi-User Dungeons. FPS games like Wolfenstein 3D (1992), Doom (1993), and Quake (1996), allowed gamers to wage virtual war and mayhem. During the same decade MUDs such as Everquest (1999) became increasingly popular with hundreds of thousands of players and millions of copies sold (Taylor, T.L., 2009). T.L. Taylor (2012) explained that these games utilized faster network connections that allowed gamers with internet access to play against each other as well as form and sustain fan communities around these games (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, De Peuter, 2003). These games were incredibly popular with fans, but their commercial success caused developing studios to consider networked-gaming as a core component to their products.

Having access to the internet allowed gamers new opportunities to organize and participate in their communities. T.L Taylor (2012) wrote about *Quake* gamers who used fan websites to organize virtual events, conventions, and competitions in the late 1990s, ultimately inspiring the birth of the esports industry. As these fan-practices became increasingly popular, innovative companies began capitalizing on LAN tournaments by trying to create professional esports tournaments and leagues. Events like Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) provided opportunities for game developers, hardware manufacturers, and sponsors to showcase their goods. Other ventures formed to try to profit off the communal interest in professional and competitive esports, but many of them were unsuccessful because there was no convenient way for audiences to access this content (Taylor, T.L., 2012). However, as advanced ICTs proliferated to consumers throughout the early 2000s, games grew increasingly networked alongside the creation of new social media platforms that allowed users new ways to produce and distribute their own media content.

2000s, MMORPGS, & Social Media Platforms

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMROPGs) took advantage of the growing availability of home computers and internet connections to allow thousands of players to play together on the same server. Online competitive games were already popular, but they didn't allow thousands of people to play together at a scale *Everquest* or *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. While *Everquest* received a lot of initial academic attention (Castronova, 2001; Taylor, T. L., 2009; Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008), *WoW* quickly became one of the most popular games on the planet. The game allows players to create avatars and partake in a medieval fantasy world similar to *Dungeons and Dragons*, allowing players to cast magic spells and participate in epic battles alongside their friends. By 2007 *WoW* was the most popular game on the planet with more virtual players than the populations of Sweden or Bolivia (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008, p. 1), with most players averaging 20 hours a week (Yee, 2008). *WoW* is important because it's extended popularity and longevity has been in large part supported by its players ability to produce, distribute, and eventually monetize) original content to social media platforms which enrich their playing experiences while developing large gaming communities (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008; Bainbridge, 2012; Nardi, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, *WoW* originally launched in 2004, the same year that Facebook was originally offered to Harvard and other Ivy League college students ("Facebook launches", n.d.). Similarly, YouTube began in 2005 (Britannica, "YouTube"), followed by Twitter's arrival in 2006 ("Twitter launches", n.d.). Many early internet users and *WoW* players were using new ICTs to create and distribute their own content. This early content production established a collective demand for gaming content, but there were no official monetization offerings that would ultimately commodify this type of content. However platforms like YouTube began introducing monetization options in 2007 ("History of monetization at YouTube, n.d.), meaning

that creators could now share a portion of the revenue made from their videos. Monetizing original content on social media platforms was one of the first glimpses of the pending social media entertainment industry that commodifies digital labor and creative production, which established the foundation for social media influencers to become a viable, albeit precarious, career path by mastering various forms of immaterial and digital labor.

Immaterial (Digital) Labor & Social Media Influencers

Immaterial Labor

Before discussing the various behaviors and skills that collectively make up what I describe as complementary labor, it is important to introduce immaterial labor to explain how the proliferation of ICTs transformed traditional understandings of labor. Srnicek (2017) quickly summarized a dramatic transformation and reorganization of labor after WWII in which U.S. manufacturing jobs that were organized under Fordist logics, i.e. relying on assembly lines where a worker is only trained on a handful of tasks in the production process. Eventually these positions were outsourced to cheaper labor markets around the world and in the Global South, resulting in Post-Fordist careers that eschew mass production and encourage laborers to assume responsibility over more than just one step of the production process, which increasingly required creative and technological skills.

While there was some initial optimism that digital platforms and ICTs would democratize the media industries (Jenkins, 2008), instead media and platform corporations have largely reorganized these industries to profit from immaterial labor (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). This was traditionally theorized as ‘immaterial labor’ (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2000), in which workers manipulate symbols, emotions, ideas, codes, and linguistic expressions to facilitate service work, usually along gendered lines (Hardt & Negri, 2000). However, the increasing

availability of advanced digital technology and new modes of media production caused some researchers to retheorize immaterial labor to include a combination of idea management as well as technological expertise that is frequently exploited by companies (Terranova, 2000; Andrejevic, 2009; Scholz, 2012). Media producers, like content creators, are responsible for creating digital media with an emotional connection with their audience.

Media production and cultural industries scholars alike consider how workers responsible for generating symbolic texts are incorporated into professional structures (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Banks, Connor, & Mayer, 2016; Herbert, Lotz, & Punathambekar, 2020). This perspective considers immaterial labor as a foundation for understanding dialectical power between media producers and the companies that distribute those texts. Companies that control how media is created and distributed have tremendous power over the texts that are produced, but these same companies must grant creative autonomy to the most successful cultural producers while the overwhelming majority of media producers and immaterial laborers are exploited and subjected to inequitable conditions.

Researchers have repeatedly described immaterial labor as a model of cultural production where technology companies and platforms profit from exploiting workers as well as users through the monetization of online communities (Scholz, 2012). Similarly, Terranova (2000) described how AOL refused to share its millions of dollars in profits with the volunteer community moderators who moderated the AOL user experience. Andrejevic (2009) theorized that YouTube offers its creators the illusion of control over their channel and fan communities, while simultaneously monetizing their sociality through pervasive ads and selling user-data. Immaterial labor provides a useful lens to examine the specific techniques, behaviors, and skills that content creators master while producing media content laden with emotional and relational

immaterial benefits for viewers who feel a sense of community, establishing the foundation for professional "social media influencer" business model (Abidin, 2016; 2018).

Microcelebrities, Creators, or Influencers?

By the late 2000s researchers were describing social media users whose savvy understanding of social media platforms like Myspace and Facebook boosted their popularity compared to average social media users. Theresa Senft (2013) coined these prodigious social media users as "microcelebrities" who presented their identities as a brand across the most popular social media platforms with highly stylized content. Essentially, by treating their followers as reliable sources of engagement with their content, microcelebrities emerged as one of the many forms of internet celebrity (Senft, 2013; Marwick, 2013; Abidin, 2016; Cirucci, 2019). Crystal Abidin has written extensively about different forms of internet celebrity, explaining that "microcelebrities" as those whose "popularity [is] premised on feelings of connection and interactive responsiveness with their audiences" (2016, p. 11).

However, Abidin distinguishes between "microcelebrities" and "social media influencers", noting that influencers consciously brand themselves across various social media platforms, like Twitch, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram among others, to international audiences, and that they enjoy lucrative brand endorsements and sponsorships (2016), explaining that while any savvy social media user can aspire to niche "microcelebrity" status, only a handful will succeed at gaining international popularity needed to be considered a bona fide "social media influencer". Therefore, whenever I use the term "social media influencer" (SMI), I am strictly referring to the international and vocational enterprises that Abidin describes in her research (Abidin, 2016; 2018). I focus primarily on SMIs in my dissertation because I'm interested in exploring how the collective assemblage of a streamer's work acts as a form of complementary labor that generates material and social value for Twitch, as well as the

limitations of these behaviors, to better understand how influencers respond to the platformization of cultural production.

How Creators Build Communities

While Abidin offers a very specific definition of SMI to refer to the most successful content creators who monetize their regional or global fanbases through advertisements, subscriptions, and branded sponsorships, researchers have also focused on an SMI's emotional and relational labor that helps them cultivate their communities. Scholars have explored the relational (Duffy, 2018) and aspirational (Baym, 2015; 2018) labor that creators perform to cultivate a loyal community of fans under precarious working conditions. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) proposed that audiences gravitate toward creators they believe are authentic, reinforcing how important it is for aspirational creators to maintain intimate connections. This labor is a crucial step in cultivating a loyal following, but as previously discussed, Twitch streamers are only eligible for monetization after significant labor to become an Affiliate or a Partner by assembling and curating their audiences. As music streaming and downloading services threatened musicians' livelihoods, Nancy Baym (2015; 2018) explained that those who embraced social media websites such as Myspace as a place to form emotional relationships and connections with their fans. Even though Baym's musicians had already established their popularity and successful careers, their notion of 'relational' labor explains how a creator's willingness to form accessible relationships with their audience boosts their popularity. Outside of forming emotionally-invested community relationships, aspirational creators endure precarious and hypercompetitive working conditions to become SMIs.

A provocative Bloomberg article (Townsend, 2019) claimed that more than 86% of people ages 18-38 would attempt a career as an influencer and ignoring the precarious working conditions that creators and influencers endure. Brooke Erin Duffy has studied the aspirational

labor of fashion Instagrammers to understand their precarious working conditions (2018), then distinguishing influencer precarity from other cultural producers because SMIs must also grapple with algorithmic biases that can drastically change their productive labor with no warning. Cunningham & Craig (2019) attributed an SMI's precarity to the fact that platform companies had the power to introduce top-down processes that affected their work, drawing comparisons to media producers in other creative industries like music, TV, and film. However, Cunningham et al. (2019) explained that part of the reason for the precarious conditions in U.S. social media entertainment stems from advertisers and platforms that fail to consider the creator's long term stability.

SMIs are paid in part by commercial sponsors and brand endorsements because they have cultivated a loyal community of fans who reliably engage with their content (similar to the way that advertisers pay to broadcast their content on popular television shows). Reliable engagement ensures that the SMIs posts remain visible and accessible across multiple social media platforms, (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016) and that influencers perform a "near-total extension of marketing logic and language into more areas of contemporary social life" (p. 15). Similarly, Hou (2018) found that beauty and fashion influencers strategically positioned themselves as experts who could explain how a product would work with their audiences, showcasing how brands and sponsors use influencers as a form of advertising. SMIs rely on detailed engagement metrics to optimize their fans' engagement with their content, appealing to commercial advertisers who want their products to be associated with the SMI (Kim, 2012; Postigo, 2016; Hou, 2018).

Extant research on SMIs and internet celebrities discusses content creators from multiple genres and industries, such as musicians, gamers, and beauty/fashion bloggers which are clearly

different industries with their own cultures, communities, and practices. However, it is still useful for providing a holistic understanding of how influencers are entrepreneurial branded-selves who develop emotional relationships with their communities of fans, who optimize their user-engagement through social media platform affordances to secure brand endorsements and sponsorships. While this can be an extremely lucrative career, influencers endure precarious working conditions such as a lack of health insurance or job stability, as well as a constant need to connect with their audience to maintain their popularity, demonstrating how unpaid labor has been normalized and valorized in the social media entertainment industry.

Social Media Entertainment Industry

Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (2019) explain that early influencers were so successful that they caused media industries to reconfigure themselves into the "social media entertainment" (SME) industry, or "an emerging proto-industry fueled by professionalizing, previously amateur content creators using new entertainment and communicative formats, including vlogging, gameplay, and do-it-yourself" (2019, p. 5). The early 2000s saw an increasing availability of digital media production technology, such as mobile phones with cameras and internet connections, that increased the popularity of social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook. These apps allowed users to upload their own content and distribute it to anyone with an internet connection and were extremely popular around the world, eventually introducing monetization features that shared ad revenue with the creator, these previously amateur content creators became increasingly professionalized over time by earning lucrative paychecks as well as brand sponsorships (Burgess & Green, 2018). For example, by 2017 more than 3 million YouTube creators received some remuneration for their content, while videos on the top 5,000 channels were viewed more than 250 billion times in aggregate (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

The SME industry is unlike any other media industry (so far) because of its "independent clash of industrial cultures" (2019, p. 22) in which Hollywood's major broadcasters profit from talent-driven screen entertainment collide with Silicon Valley's reliance on information communication and constant state of iterative development. This framework is especially useful for understanding both where and how influencers have been institutionalized into the contemporary media entertainment economy, but also for understanding how Twitch influencers combine aspects from the technology-driven video game industry as well as the talent-driven models from screen-entertainment industries to form an immersive and interactive experience that is, at the time of writing, unique to Twitch.

How Twitch Streamers Reconfigured the Gaming Industry

Traditionally, publishing companies have relied on television and print ads to market their games, but livestreaming a game on Twitch allows audiences to experience the game rather than relying on highly polished advertisements that don't always reflect the game itself. Advertising on Twitch has been particularly useful for indie studios with less resources than multimillion AAA game studios. Recently, popular Twitch streamers have been integrated into a number of advertising and marketing campaigns. For example, the development studio Psyonix gave early versions of their game *Rocket League* to Twitch streamers and YouTubers in 2015 who used the game to create content on their own channels, resulting in a mutually-beneficial relationship for both parties (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019a). Psyonix employees consulted with Twitch representatives when developing their competitive esports league for their game (Purcell, 2016), demonstrating how livestreaming and spectating are increasingly thought of throughout the development process. While Twitch is a relatively young company, it has already had a tremendous impact on the gaming and media entertainment industries, "No longer are major corporations tightly controlling the entire value chain of media production and consumption, a

contrast particularly apparent when we compare Twitch to linear television or more traditional print media" (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019a, p. 684)".

Admittedly, Twitch strategically incorporates new types of streamers onto their platform including journalists and musicians (Foxman, Partin, & Harris, under review), as well as political commentators (Harris, Foxman, & Partin, under review), to attract new users to their platform. However, Twitch is deeply entangled with the gaming industry largely because streamers created an interactive and communal form of advertising digital games to massive audiences. Johnson & Woodcock (2019a) interviewed streamers who emphatically believed that every single broadcast advertised the game they were playing. That being said, the growing popularity of Twitch streamers has created a new way to review, critique, and advertise video games (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019b). Which has in turn caused many game developers to draw prominent streamers and content creators into their game design and advertising processes, like Blizzard's decision to preview an early version of their highly anticipated *Overwatch 2* to creators to hype the game (Marsh, 2021), or when *Apex Legends* streamers critiqued game developers hoping to influence the game's design to their thousands of followers (Ciocchetti, 2021) throughout the social media entertainment industry.

In this capacity, Twitch streamers frequently produce, distribute, and monetize original gaming content across multiple platforms such as Twitch, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and more. The U.S. social media entertainment industry is dominated by a handful of technology companies like Google, Amazon, Meta/Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft manage the most popular social media platforms in North America and Western Europe. These apps exist and compete alongside other platforms, like Twitter and TikTok, that also profit primarily from ad revenue, as well as other popular websites that are generally not monetized like Reddit. This

establishes a diverse platformed marketplace for streamers and content creators to monetize their content on multiple channels on different platforms. Social media and content creator scholars have explored how creators manage careers on multiple platforms as a way to increase their odds of commercial success while attempting to combat their precocity through multiple sources of income (Abidin, 2016; 2018; Baym, 2018; Khamis et al., 2016; Marwick, 2013), or to avoid 'putting all of their eggs in one basket' (Glatt, 2022).

This literature explains why streamers are motivated to maintain multiple channels which ultimately blur the distinct boundaries between one platform like Twitch and another like Twitter. Twitch streamers frequently use platforms like Twitter, apps like Discord, as well as websites like Reddit in tandem during their livestreams. While it can be confusing and dizzying to follow a streamer's performance across all of these channels, it is important to recall that many of these platforms like YouTube and Instagram also offer ad-share options that allow streamers to maintain multiple sources of revenue. In this project I draw heavily from publicly available discourses on Twitter because it captures the dialectic relationships between platforms like Twitch that tweet directly with streamers as well as commercial sponsors. Twitter posts then act as a reflection of the existing power relations between the various actors within the social media entertainment industry.

These effects on the gaming and entertainment industries are not occurring in a vacuum and are part of a much larger oligopolistic struggle to dominate the media and cultural industries and will be discussed as an extension of platformization in the next chapter, but this chapter has outlined how individual streamers have used Twitch to become influencers through a series of aspirational, relational, and precarious labor. However, making connections with their audience has no guarantee that a creator will become an influencer, even if they are partners who have full

access to all of Twitch's monetization offerings. Therefore, the next chapter introduces platform theory to explain how creators who complement, or support, a platform's efforts to grow exponentially are the most likely to be rewarded with opportunities that would further their careers.

CHAPTER 2

The Platformization of Industrial Cultural Production

This chapter uses the platformization of cultural production (POCP) theoretical framework to situate livestreaming labor within the greater media landscape characterized by the convergence of the cultural industries (e.g. journalism, games, media and entertainment) and internet technology (IT) corporations. POCP theory emerges out of work on platforms as well as work on cultural industries; however, the combination of these separate pieces is important because it identifies a platform's logics to make sense of the company's actions, how these platform logics establish the conditions under which cultural producers can do complementary labor, as well as how monetizing creative output causes cultural producers to become increasingly contingent on platforms which only further exacerbates power imbalances. Therefore, I will briefly address each of these foundational research areas separately before bringing them together and applying them to Twitch and the complementary labor of streamers.

As the previous chapter outlined, the proliferation of sophisticated networked communication technology allowed people to create and produce their own media content. Uploading this content to centralized platforms such as YouTube, however, led to social media platforms becoming increasingly powerful forces within this new market. This power allowed individual platform's structures and norms to dictate ongoing relationships between creators, their content, and economic practices. Platform scholars foreground the corporate ownership models of social media companies to identify numerous logics that structure a corporate platform's behavior in the marketplace, such as rapid expansion and acquisition of new users to generate ad revenue (van Dijck et al., 2018; Couldry & Mejias, 2019). As amateur content producers accrued more followers and engagement with their social media content, platforms like Twitch and YouTube introduced monetization policies that compensated creators for their content. This decision is a crucial moment in terms of platformization, or Twitch's "penetration

of economic and infrastructural extensions of online platforms into the web, affecting the production, distribution, and circulation of cultural content" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4275).

The increased integration of platform logics into content creation led platform scholars to turn to existing media studies theories that grapple with questions of power in the production of entertaining content. With roots in the Frankfurt School's critique of "the culture industry" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1977), when large conglomerates commodify media often at the expense of meaning, studies of cultural production frequently analyze the unique challenges and opportunities that shape the conditions under which media are created and distributed. Media and cultural studies researchers have theorized mass media corporations, such as book publishers, music labels, film and television studios, as well as journalists, as cultural industries with enormous influence over the production and distribution of media that influence how people make sense of and understand their surroundings (Hesmondhalgh, 2019).

POCP theory weaves these threads together to offer a political economic framework for understanding how corporate platforms have evolved from start-up social media networks into international corporate conglomerates (Helmond, 2015; Helmond et al., 2019) as well as for addressing the impact this has on content, creators, and overall structures of cultural power (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). As platforms like Twitch become entwined with increasing forms of cultural production, such as news journalism (Foxman et al., under review) and political commentary (Harris et al., under review), this theory provides a lens through which to analyze how Twitch exerts control over influential streamers who perform complementary labor.

Platform Theory: Key Concepts & Logics

Platforms can be broadly understood as software programs or mobile phone applications that provide the infrastructure required for two or more users to complete social or economic

transactions (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). Twitch, Lyft, DoorDash, Facebook, and video games like *Minecraft* and *Grand Theft Auto* are all digital platforms that rely on modular and programmable software that allows users to connect with one another in a variety of social and economic capacities. *Platformization* then refers to the increased significance of these platforms to everyday life. Scholars such as Nieborg and Helmond define the process of platformization as a form of evolutionary growth fueled by a company's ability to introduce new technical features that expand the platform's functionality and draw in more users for more time (Helmond, Nieborg, & van der Vlist, 2019; Nieborg & Helmond, 2019).

This evolutionary growth is a defining feature of our modern media marketplace, which is dominated by a small handful of large tech companies: Google, Apple, Facebook (now Meta), Amazon and Microsoft (GAFAM for short). These companies produce (or purchase) and run the majority of modern platforms, both media- and non-media-based. When a platform offers new services and products, it creates new ways of matching users with each other as well as advertisers and vendors—all while expanding its influence into new entertainment, social, political, journalistic, educational, commerce, and other civic spaces (Gillespie 2010, 2017; Helmond, 2015; Crain, 2019). By assuming the role of 'matchmaker' (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016), platforms such as Twitch (an Amazon company) position themselves as vital spaces for social interaction, information-seeking, entertainment, political discourse, and other exchanges). Academic interest in corporate platforms has been largely sustained by software studies, business studies, political economy, and media studies. Each of these disciplines offer varying perspectives on how platforms operate and grow by researching key concepts such as infrastructure, multi-sided markets and network effects, economies of scale, and governance to

identify platform logics that make sense of Twitch's behavior in the market (van Dijck et al., 2018; Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Infrastructure

Computer scientists and software engineers were among the first to refer to platforms as programmable and iterative infrastructure that allowed other users to build on top of (Bogost & Montfort, 2009). Similarly, Tarleton Gillespie (2010) explained that this iteration is performed through standardized computational technologies, like Software Developer Kits and Application Programing Interfaces, that allow people to create features and affordances that extend the platform's original functionality. These programmable tools construct the digital infrastructure and networks needed for platforms to exist and run. In this capacity, software engineers or game developers who produce innovative content are doing complementary labor because their work contributes to the platform's expansion in a process that Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy (2022) describe as "progressive infrastructural integration and interoperability" (p. 57) that explains how the platform's digital infrastructure becomes further enmeshed with cultural and telecommunication industries. This form of platformization can be seen on Twitch when the company captured and integrated the lucrative Bits currency system as one of the platform's core functions (Partin, 2020).

Multi-sided markets

A platform's computational customization is a core component for establishing multi-sided markets that allow multiple stakeholders opportunities to contribute to and profit from the platform (Helmond & van der Vlist, 2019). For instance, Evans & Schmalensee (2016) analyze how platforms act as matchmakers that facilitate social and economic exchanges, inserting themselves into and becoming essential to these relationships. As this occurs, platforms enable users, entrepreneurs, as well as commercial businesses to locate each other and exchange value.

Of particular importance to my dissertation research is what business and software studies scholars have described as a complementary process in which third party cultural producers complement the platform's marketplace by developing new programs, affordances, and features that create new offerings that entice users to return to the platform's multi-sided market (Bodle, 2011; Bucher, 2013; Reider & Sire, 2014; Hagiu, 2014). I extend this concept to Twitch streamers that monetizing their labor by growing their audience or showing them more advertisements, both of which synergize with Twitch's business model. Platform scholars rely on concepts such as network effects and economies of scale to theorize why complementors would perform this labor in the first place.

Network effects and economies of scale

Platform companies are extremely competitive, and the platformized economy is often characterized as a winner-take-all industry in which the first to offer a specific type of interaction or experience is generally the one that succeeds (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016). This competition can be understood as a company's attempt to establish network effects, "meaning that an increase in viewers, advertisers, and creators makes the platform more valuable to each of the other groups, which in turn further inflates the number of viewers, advertisers, and creators" (Poell et al., 2022, p 4). Similarly, economies of scale refers to how platforms use the internet's near-ubiquitous interconnectivity to attract new user and sponsors from around the world. Both network effects and economies of scale demonstrate the potential scope of a platform's multi-sided marketplace. This potential for virtually unlimited growth can be just as lucrative for cultural producers as it is for platforms like Twitch, which is just one reason why so many perform complementary labor that expands the platform.

Governance

Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of platform companies is that these corporations retain the exclusive authority to govern and moderate their proprietary aps and services. Terms of Service and Community Guidelines agreements are just two of the policies that establish what forms of behavior and cultural production are permissible on the platform (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Similarly, platform companies are solely responsible for establishing how monetization and moderation occur (Gillespie, 2010; Poell et al., 2022). This sole authority to implement moderation and governance creates significant power imbalances as cultural producers are increasingly contingent on access to the platform, as well as on the platform to operate consistently (Gillespie, 2018). Conversely, cultural producers, influencers, and platform complementors alike are beholden and subject to platform governance that is completely outside of their control. From this perspective, platformization then describes how these forms of governance are "becoming increasingly central to cultural exchange, governance by platforms increasingly shapes the governance of online spaces more generally" (Nieborg et al., 2022, p. 19). The process of platformization has affected many industries, from food delivery and ride sharing to craft sales (Etsy). In order to understand how media and entertainment industries have grappled with platformization, however, it is necessary to first briefly outline what makes these industries unique and what their key concerns are.

Cultural Industries Research

Cultural industries scholars have historically analyzed the dialectical power between capitalists and creative producers, as well as the conditions under which cultural texts are produced, distributed, and consumed that can be read for deeper meanings. Media and cultural studies researchers have theorized mass media corporations, such as book publishers, music labels, film and television studios, as well as journalists, as cultural industries with enormous

influence over the production and distribution of media that influence how people make sense of and understand their surroundings (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). These industries produce cultural 'texts' in which cultural industries scholars 'read' reflections of reality and lived experiences, while exploring how texts shape audiences' understandings of their identity and their community.

What makes this perspective useful for my study on livestreaming platforms is that cultural industries have a long tradition of adapting to and reinventing themselves alongside technological innovations (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1977; Miege, 1987; Partin, 2020). As new technologies are introduced, whether it be the VCR, the CD-ROM, or a file sharing program like Napster, the media corporations that make up the cultural industries have been forced to incorporate these new technologies into their business model or risk bankruptcy (like Polaroid). Therefore this theoretical perspective evaluates a corporation's power in terms of their ability to integrate new digital platform technology to control the production and distribution of content. The social media entertainment industry is a new marketplace that has evolved extremely quickly and has often been framed as something entirely new. However, this industry is just the latest iteration in the historic tradition of legacy media industries. Controlling the production and distribution of cultural texts grants Twitch the power to assimilate hobbyist endeavors, such as video game streaming and producing gaming videos, into their corporate structures.

The concept of 'the cultural industries' originated with Frankfurt School scholars Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1977), who believed that the small number of film producers in Hollywood granted them considerable power and influence over the entire industry. They believed that the film industry was organized in a way that encouraged a highly concentrated group of media owners who used vertical integration strategies to their advantage.

Film studios acted as a “culture industry” that reinforced hegemonic views in a way that conditioned proletariat audiences to accept the world around them (1977), such as when the Disney company produced WWII propaganda to sell war bonds and maintain Americans’ support for the war effort. Adorno and Horkheimer thought that the lack of access to films and the lack of diversity in films themselves created a homogenous audience that would unknowingly adhere to hegemonic norms.

Bernard Miege critiqued Adorno and Horkheimer’s deterministic understanding of the effects of media ownership, offering “cultural industries” (1987), in the plural, to highlight the complexity of cultural production that varied according to each unique market as well as the extent of industrialization in that particular market. For example, the production of books and art is not organized the same way as the production of television and films. Miege argued that technological innovation and the increasing investment of capital created new opportunities for corporate structures to increasingly commodify the cultural industries. Furthermore, Miege outlined how the degree of industrialization also establishes working conditions in the cultural industries and that some workers, such as musicians or actors, could achieve a level of success that granted them some autonomy over their creative labor.

Box 2.1 Summary of Distinctive Features of The Cultural Industries (p. 31)
Problems: ● Risky business. ● Creativity versus commerce. ● High production costs and low reproduction costs. ● Semi-public goods; the need to create scarcity. Responses: ● Misses are offset against hits by building a repertoire. ● Concentration, integration and co-opting publicity. ● Artificial scarcity. ● Formatting: stars, genres and serials. ● Loose control of symbol creators; tight control (where possible) of distribution and marketing.

Finally, David Hesmondhalgh (2019) combines Adorno and Horkheimer's "culture industry" with Miege's "cultural industries" to describe the complicated web of economic, political, and cultural power relations in the contemporary cultural industries. Hesmondhalgh believes that the cultural industries face a series of unique problems, and that their solutions to these problems help distinguish them from other professional industries. These problems included: high production costs and risks, balancing tensions between creativity and commerce, as well as the need to create artificial scarcity. High production costs describes the absorbent sums of money required to acquire the equipment and talent necessary to produce media texts. These high production costs are generally before a text is publicly available, meaning that cultural industries are inherently risky because there is no guarantee a text will be popular enough to generate a profit, meaning that many cultural industries produce a diverse assortment of texts to offset inevitable losses.

Hesmondhalgh explains these industries are defined by a tension between the artistic impulses of textual producers and the profit-driven motivations of those funding production. These tensions take many forms but one of the most common is how the creative production process is organized to meet the deadlines determined by the corporate producers, like when game developers 'crunch' to finish the game before the date the financing producers picked (Cote & Harris, 2021). In addition, cultural texts such as films and song are semi-public goods that can be reproduced and consumed multiple times without degrading the quality of the original. This means that while there are inherent risks in funding original creative texts, the low reproduction costs offer a chance for members of the cultural industries to offset losses from inevitable commercial failures. The last problem that Hesmondhalgh outlined was artificial

scarcity, which means that because texts are easily reproduced companies in these industries resort to advertising and marketing to manufacture demand for the product in a saturated media marketplace.

Box 4.2 'Stages' of Cultural Production (p. 95-96)

Note: These stages do not necessarily follow on from one another, as in the popular image of a factory production line. Instead, they overlap, interact and sometimes conflict.

Creation

- Conception- design, realisation, interpretation; the writing of screenplays and treatments, composition and improvisation of songs and so on.
- Execution- performance in recording studios and television sets, as well as on film.
- Transcription on to a final master- involving editing (film, books and magazines) and mixing (music, film)
- Reproduction and duplication- in the form of printing, copying CDs from a master recording and making multiple copies of a film from a negative (there is no equivalent in television); or the dissemination of digital files. The text now takes the form that the audience will experience.

Circulation

- Marketing- including advertising and packaging (each of which has its own processes of conception and reproduction), but also aspects that might take place alongside conception or between the transcription and reproduction of the main text, such as market research.
- Publicity- involving trying to ensure that other organisations provide publicity for the commodity.
- **Distributing** and wholesaling (or the broadcasting of a television programme)- the movement of goods to the final consumers or users
- Retailing/exhibition/broadcast.

Source: Adapted from Ryan (1992)

Hesmondhalgh's summary of problems and solutions that are unique to highly industrialized markets that are susceptible to economic pressures are useful for considering the scale and scope of the industry, but his distinction between creation and circulation stages of production provides a useful template for describing how labor is organized for different laborers who work in the industry. Creating cultural texts requires creative input from the people who conceive and execute ideas as well as those who work to reproduce or transcribe the text into a

master copy. This productive labor is performed by writers, software developers, graphic designers, voice actors, sound editors, as well as many others whose work is directly involved with the production and creation of the cultural text.

The circulation stage of cultural production is defined by the marketization of texts and includes the marketing and advertising, the distribution, and the exhibition of the broadcast (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, Box 4.2), but focusing only on Twitch's role in the circulation stage neglects the meaningful social, cultural, and economic interplay between different actors in the space. These are the commercialization tasks that maximize profits from a cultural text. Advertisers and marketing agencies are used to create publicity and demand for the text, while creative executives negotiate distribution contracts with television networks and cinemas. This circulatory labor is a key site in which cultural texts are commodified in legacy cultural industries like music and television.

Twitch as Part of the Cultural Industries

Hesmondhalgh's (2019) characteristic problems and stages of production framework is useful for determining unique aspects about Twitch as part of the cultural industries, but more interesting is how the framework points toward Twitch's increasing control over cultural production. Twitch's production costs are extremely high because it would be impossible for the livestreaming platform to operate without access to servers and web service providers. Amazon acquired Twitch in 2014 and has allowed Twitch to make use of additional Amazon Web Services infrastructures to help reduce operating costs (Panneton, 2019; Vanian, 2018). While Twitch's production costs are quite high, these are offset by the low reproduction costs of adding new streamers and viewers to the platform's infrastructure. In legacy cultural industries like television or film, corporate studios safeguard against the risk of commercial failure by

diversifying the texts that are produced in hopes that the success of one will mitigate the losses of the others. This problem is not entirely applicable to Twitch, because the corporate platform avoids producing original content. The platform's monetization offerings ensure that streamers assume this creative risk of failure by only paying streamers who have already succeeded at cultivating and entertaining their audiences.

As part of the cultural industries, there is significant tension between streamers who want creative autonomy and Twitch's corporate mandate to generate profits. These tensions frequently flare up the most during issues with invasive advertisements that interrupt the streamer's broadcast that frustrate viewers (Grayson, 2020). Even though Twitch occasionally compromises with streamers, such as removing the most disruptive types of ads (Grayson, 2020), these tensions rarely affect the company's ad revenue logics. On Twitch, this artificial scarcity can be seen through the platform's reliance on live broadcasts that create a new experience every day. Livestreaming as a modality fits this need for artificial scarcity particularly well compared to the video on demand format because the livestreams are co-created by the streamer and their audience in a way that is impossible to replicate when watching a recording of the same broadcast.

Whereas television and film studios must employ large work forces to create media content, Twitch maintains virtually no responsibility in the creation stage of production because this labor is once again exported to streamers who routinely produce and edit their own streams and videos (Taylor, 2018). Streamers learn and master a suite of media production skills that largely consolidates labor in a way that would be impossible in other cultural industries. This means that Twitch streamers accept virtually all of the creative labor as their responsibility in exchange for creative autonomy and freedom to broadcast anything they want if it avoids

violating Twitch's Terms of Service or Community Guideline agreements. This creative autonomy offers streamers numerous ways to do complementary labor but it also normalizes the idea that all creative production on Twitch can be performed by one worker.

Twitch is largely involved in the marketing aspects of the circulation stage of production. Unlike film studios that must work with third-party cinemas or television networks to distribute texts, Twitch offers a centralized space that is free for viewers to access and for streamers to work. Twitch employs internal advertising and marketing teams to produce promotional content, but again the burden of promotion is largely exported to the streamer. On Twitch advertising isn't used to finance the production of the text itself, like a Hollywood film or a AAA video game. Instead, streamers who have already successfully demonstrated widespread popularity attract sponsors and requests to appear in advertisements. However, ads appear on a streamer's broadcast whether they are eligible for ad share revenue as a member of the Partner program or not. Therefore, Twitch profits from all advertising on the platform, while streamers compete with one another before they're even eligible to profit from the same advertisements. While the cultural industries framework identifies firmly underscores Twitch's power over a streamer's cultural production, it is important to refer back to POCP to theorize how streamers are enticed to complement the company's growth logics.

Platformization of Cultural Production

Legacy cultural industries conglomerates like Disney are extremely powerful and have incorporated elements of both horizontal and vertical integration into its business. Even though Disney is attempting to adapt to the POCP through its streaming platform Disney+, these are merely new portals to access legacy content with (Lotz, 2017), rather than social media profiles that are reliant on creators to produce original content (Postigo, 2016). However, managing

platforms allow GAFAM corporations to compete over entire *modalities*. Google dominates the world's search engine market, YouTube is the world's most popular video on demand platform, and Twitch is one of the most popular livestreaming platforms in the world. This means that platforms like the Apple App Store and Twitch have been inserted between many kinds of cultural producers, businesses, and audiences. inserted themselves between textual producers and audiences. POCP theory then offers a lens to better understand how platforms have been inserted between producers and brands in an increasing amount of industries.

POCP was originally developed as a way to understand how a platform's growing popularity caused news outlets and games studios to change the ways that texts were created, distributed, marketed, and monetized (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Since then, POCP has been expanded upon in Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy's book (2022) that analyzes how corporate platforms act as infrastructure to support tightly controlled markets. This causes some, but not all, cultural industries to reorganize and resume business according to the logics of platforms like Twitch that monetize cultural production, like games, videos, and news, through ad revenue. As the POCP envelops new forms of media production, "it intensifie[s] structures of worker individualization and commercialization" (Poell et al., 2022, p. 188) which coerces individuals into contingent relationships with largely unregulated platform companies. Ultimately, cultural producers are contingent on access to the platform itself as well as contingent on the policies, that can be changed at any time, a platform uses to govern its service.

Scott's (2019) research focuses on the fan-corporation relationship by examining the limitations of fan production when corporate media conglomerates enforce intellectual property rights to control fannish forms of cultural production. In her work, Scott draws from broader fan studies and uses 'affirmational' and 'transformational' as theoretical models for fan participation,

where affirmational refers to fan practices that discuss the text without challenging the authority of the producers or its ideological meaning. Conversely transformational participation is where creators take creative liberties with the text, often 'shipping' characters and manipulating the plot points to better suit their fannish desires. Traditionally these modes of participation have been gendered, linking males to affirmational modes and females to transformational. Scott's (2020) uses Chris Hardwick's show *The Talking Dead* to demonstrate how the network AMC incorporated this affirmational cultural production into their market, whereas female and transformational forms of cultural production were often met with hostility or prohibited.

While Scott isn't explicitly examining the relationship between platforms and cultural production, her examples of affirmational and transformational cultural production offer an interesting perspective when considered through the POCP. According to POCP theory, Chris Hardwick's affirmational talk show is a form of complementary labor that attracts new viewers and sponsors to *The Walking Dead* franchise. However, the fact that producers who transformed a text's official reading by shipping characters or developing non-canonical stories were prohibited means that there are power imbalances between cultural producers, as well as that there are some limitations and barriers that affect cultural producers differently. Scott's example of original fan videos is a brief introduction into some of the inequities and limitations to cultural production on a platform, but as more serious forms of cultural production, like news journalism (Foxman et al., under review) and political commentary (Harris et al., under review), are subject to Twitch's control, it is imperative to consider how these inequities and limitations can discriminate against vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Twitch originated as a platform that catered to gamers, but its novel monetization features and affordances have attracted creators from other genres such as musicians, journalists,

cooking, as well as artists to name just a few. This is potentially problematic because the first content creators to become influencers on Twitch have been men who fit within what was once considered the core gaming demographic (Cote, 2020). Therefore, the streamers who complement Twitch's profit-driven strategies, by attracting new audiences or by catering to the core demographics of 16-34 year old white men, are more likely to be permitted frictionless entry into Twitch's marketplace, whereas streamers who resist or challenge the platform's relationship with potential advertisers are less likely to be offered the same opportunities. By arranging monetization in a way that prioritizes ad revenue, Twitch pressures streamers to behave in ways that complements the corporations' efforts to rearrange video game, SME, and legacy media industries. Since my dissertation focuses primarily on complementary labor and its limitations, it is important to review how Twitch's ad revenue model and lack of regulation can produce hostile working environments for some creators, while allowing for frictionless entry for others.

Twitch's Ad Revenue Logics & Labor Exploitation

Scholars have argued that the heart of a platform's socioeconomic and political power is the ability to convert raw user data into sophisticated user data reports (Fuchs et al., 2013; van Dijck et al., 2019) that are sold to advertising companies as a form of what Crain (2019) labeled "surveillance advertising". These advertising and marketing-based logics have proven extremely lucrative and have in part funded the GAFAM quintets' aggressive acquisition behaviors (Helmond, Nieborg, & van der Vlist, 2017) to maintain their dominant market position (Helmond et al., 2019), such as when Amazon acquired Twitch for $1 Billion in 2014. As users spend more and more time on platform companies cultivate increasingly sophisticated user behavior reports. Therefore, Amazon's acquisition of Twitch should be understood as an attempt

to create an all-encompassing, and largely unregulated, advertising revenue empire by collecting user data from nearly every aspect of their lives.

Gillespie (2010) argued that GAFAM marketing and legal representatives used the term 'platform' to promote their product as a venue for free speech and public debate as a strategy to avoid the legal responsibilities required from media broadcast companies. Similarly, Gillespie unpacks how the United States' reluctance to regulate free speech online has allowed members of the GAFAM quintet to moderate themselves:

> Social media platforms have increasingly taken on the responsibility of curating the content and policing the activity of their users: not simply to meet legal requirements, or to avoid having additional policies imposed, but also to avoid losing offended or harassed users, to placate advertisers eager to associate their brands with a healthy online community, to protect their corporate image, and to honor their own personal and institutional ethics. (Gillespie, 2018).

However, acting as matchmaker rather than an employer or publisher allows Twitch to increasingly profit from the precarious labor of aspirational streamers without shouldering the responsibility of decent employment with benefits and protections (Peck & Theodore, 2012; Rosenblatt, 2017), which are even more exploitative toward aspirational streamers from marginalized communities (van Doorn, 2017). Similarly, this allows Twitch to avoid any legal responsibility for what is broadcasted on its platform. Platforms such as Twitch profit from ubiquitous surveillance advertising systems while remaining under no legal objection to moderate their services.

Twitch maintains a powerful position where it profits from all streamers' success while avoiding any obligation or responsibility for this structure and sustaining an environment in

which all but the most financially successful streamers are ignored and left to fend for themselves amidst growing sexist, racist, and homophobic discrimination (Consalvo, 2018; Ruberg et al., 2019; Ruberg, 2021). Streamers and journalists have repeatedly discussed "hate raids", or targeted harassment campaigns which weaponize anonymous bots as well as Twitch's promotional features to flood a streamer's chatroom with vitriol and hate (Chalk, 2021). These hate raids are overwhelmingly unleashed upon streamers from vulnerable and marginalized communities, especially female, queer, and BIPOC, (Horetski, 2022), reiterating what scholars have written about gendered discrimination online (Marwick, 2021; Nakamura, 2007; Consalvo, 2018). Twitch's repeated failure to prevent hate raids (Horetski, 2022) characterizes the company's ambivalence toward automated discrimination is inherently problematic, and discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, but has yet to prevent Twitch from reshaping three powerful (and interrelated) cultural industries, including: the advertising sector of the games industry, the GAFAM platform industry, as well as the SME industry.

Therefore, the next two chapters answer the following research questions through two case studies that are designed to separately observe how an influencer's complementary labor on Twitch can create frictionless and lucrative opportunities for some, as well as the limitations of this complementary labor that apply disproportionately toward streamers from marginalized and vulnerable communities.

RQ 1 - How do influencers navigate the demands of the Twitch platform, sponsors and advertisers, and their communities?

- What labor is involved in these processes?

RQ 2 - How do successful influencers complement the platform logics of Twitch?

- What are the limits of complementing behaviors?
- How are these limits differently experienced by different creators?
- How do they respond to these challenges?

The first case study focuses on one of the most popular Twitch streamers, TimTheTatMan and his how his comedic relationship with the *Fall Guys Game* Twitter account acted as a form of complementary labor by hyping attention and excitement for the game into a discernable media frenzy. In the early stages of the game's release, Tim was made the victim in a series of jokes, critiques, and trollish[2] tweets that resulted in him obsessively playing (and advertising) the game for nearly a week. The incident demonstrates how participating in self-deprecating jokes are important forms of complementary labor that created value for the streamer, Twitch, as well as various actors and brands. Whereas the second case study investigates the limits of complementary behavior during an official Twitch promotion. Twitch originally planned a campaign to use a streamer's likeness as an emote, (i.e. Emoji) in a marketing event that was supposed to celebrate the diversity of Twitch streamers. Unfortunately, the women, queer, and Black streamers who participated were victims of 'hate raids' (Horetski, 2022) and targeted harassment that caused Twitch to cancel the entire event. The fact that this harassment was only directed at vulnerable and marginalized streamers, as well as Twitch's decision to avoid promoting the event, highlights how some streamers face additional limitations to their complementary labor based on their identities. These cases provide meaningful evidence as to some of the gendered, sexual, and racial barriers that already exclude Twitch streamers, but as the POCP continues the biases that Twitch displays in these case studies need to be interrogated further in different forms of cultural production.

[2] Trollish here is derived from Phillips (2016) work on trolling as antagonistic behavior in pursuit of humor. Trolling can describe benevolent and malevolent practices, but in Chapter 3 I am largely referring to it as a form of good-natured teasing that adds to the entertainment of the stream. These are very different from the targeted harassment known as 'hate raids' seen in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 3

TimTheTatMan Vs. Fall Guys: Complementary Labor & Professionalized Twitch Metas

Figure 4

FallGuys spreads ‘Tim is Bad’ discourse.

FallGuys (FG) is a game that was developed by Media Tonic, which was originally released August 4, 2020 (Statt, 2020). The game is part of the battle royale genre, in which players compete against each other in a map that is constantly reducing in size to accelerate and add excitement to the game play. In FG, players control what appears to be a marshmallow through a series of races through obstacle courses and challenges that become increasingly challenging over time. At the beginning of each new match, there are roughly 60 players who are eliminated after failing a specific challenge or losing the race, adding further interest in the game. All of this made for a wildly popular release in which FG sold more than 7 million copies on PC and even more downloads on PlayStation players who could download the game for free in the month of August of 2020 (Statt, 2020). While these are impressive figures, it fails to consider that much of FG’s success can be attributed to the free publicity they received from one of the most influential streamers on Twitch.

Timothy “TimTheTatMan” Betar was one of the most popular Twitch streamers, with more than 5 million followers (“TimTheTatman—Statistics”, n.d.) on the platform. I’ll describe Betar’s personal brand in greater detail later, but it is worth mentioning that he typically plays First Person Shooter games like *Call of Duty* that emulate contested firefights. However, as FG became increasingly visible on Twitch, Betar began playing the game as well which ultimately created an opportunity for FG to target the streamer on Twitter from roughly August 11-20, 2020. FG is designed to be cute, the player controls an avatar that looks like a cute marshmallow as they compete against other players in obstacle courses and races. The marketing staff behind the FG account quickly embraced a joke from Betar’s community that he would never win a game of FG which quickly evolved into a campaign against Betar. Public ridicule quickly spread throughout gaming communities as well as in games journalism, all contributing to a media frenzy at Betar’s inability to win a game. This is a useful example for considering how influencers collaborate with other platform complementors like game developers, as well as for unpacking some of the limitations to an influencer’s complementary labor.

Inductive thematic analysis summarized how Betar’s gameplay shifted from casual enjoyment into a state of obsession to win a game of FG to silence his critics, attracting further media attention and culminating in a media frenzy around the spectacle. This obsessive gameplay caused record-breaking streams for Betar when he finally won a game of FG, averaging 182,574 concurrent viewers, with 1.29 million unique viewers in his stream on August 18, 2020 (Figure 5, below). While Betar’s participation in the jokes about his ineptitude were successful for his own viewership, it was also a crucial form of complementary labor that helped Media Tonic sell more than 7 million copies of their game in less than a month (Statt, 2020).

This outlines a symbiotic relationship between game developers and streamers, both of which complements Twitch's ad revenue and expansion platform logics.

Figure 5

Betar shares the metrics that confirm his boost in engagement from playing FG.

This case examines how creators complement platform logics for growth, audience retention, as well as attracting new sponsors, arguing that creators who are most receptive to these logics are offered lucrative professional opportunities. Therefore, Betar is an excellent creator to observe because of his willingness to sacrifice his dignity in pursuit of collaborating with brands to create lucrative opportunities for all parties, like he did with FG game. Betar has been laboriously cultivating his following and monetizing his content for years and that accomplishment should not be minimized or understated because his level of success is so rare in the social media entertainment industry. However, he is also privileged in that he is a Cis-heterosexual white male who describes himself as a "nerd" ("TimTheTatman—Twitter", n.d.), which has historically considered its 'core' gaming demographic (Cote, 2020; Salter & Blodgett, 2017), and is currently Twitch's largest audience demographic of 16-34 year old white males

(Yosilewitz, 2018; Twitch Advertising, n.d.). I want to avoid suggesting that his success is entirely because of his identity because that would erase the work that Betar has done to succeed, but his identity is one that sponsors and brands have decided is both valuable and safe to be associated with Betar. However, this case demonstrates some limitations of complementary labor in that even streamers like Betar who offer little to no resistance to Twitch's ad revenue logics are still vulnerable to behavior that could be reasonably perceived as harassment and exploitation from other platform complementors, like game developers, advertisers, and news media outlets.

Therefore, this case begins with a summary of Betar's streaming career and reputation, then reviews the historical context of the livestreaming industry via platform-exclusive contracts for streamers before moving onto the analysis and discussion of Betar's involvement with FG. Ultimately this case demonstrates how influential streamers like Betar create opportunities for game developers and ancillary media producers to capitalize on while simultaneously complementing Twitch's expansion. As discussed later in Chapter 4, Betar's embodied identity offers no resistance or challenge to Twitch's growth directives, or the company's perceived brand-friendliness, yet FG was still able to effectively coerce Betar into obsessively playing their game and even causing him to throw multiple rageful temper tantrums. These outbursts are important because he swears and screams in frustration without threatening the visibility of the FG media frenzy spectacle. Livestreamed gameplay creates a more form of spectatorship than traditional advertising, evidenced by FG's explosive sales debut with more than 7 million sales in their first month (Statt, 2020).

Betar's Career & Adaptability

Timothy "TimTheTatMan" Betar is one of the most recognizable and famous U.S. streamers with more than 7 million followers on Twitch ("TimTheTatman—Statistics", n.d.) and

more than 4.3 million followers on YouTube ("TimTheTatman—YouTube", n.d.)[3]. Betar started uploading YouTube videos in 2011 and has been streaming on Twitch since 2014, and frequently collaborates with some of the first celebrity streamers like Ninja, Dr. Disrespect, and DrLupo. Betar is a variety streamer who plays multiple games on stream, but he tends to gravitate toward first-person shooters with online multiplayer modes, especially battle royale games that pit players against each other in a map that grows smaller as the game goes on to draw attention to key chokeholds on the map.

Over the years Betar has learned to identify which games will be a passing fad and which will become lasting presences in the community. For example, Betar began playing *Fortnite* when it launched in 2017 throughout 2020, when he substituted it for *Call of Duty: Warzone*, which remains his primary game at the time of writing. However, as a variety streamer Betar also experiments with other highly anticipated games that will likely attract an audience, like when he played *World of Warcraft: Classic* when it first launched in August 2019 (Adams, 2019). This suggests that playing a variety of games helps streamers remain relevant in a constantly-evolving marketplace for attention, while creating opportunities for sponsors and advertising contracts.

As one of the most popular Twitch streamers, Betar has multiple sponsors with food and beverage brands, retail brands, as well as individual games. His website boasts multiple deals with gaming and computer brands like Razer and NZXT, as well as partnerships with Chipotle, Doritos, and Sour Patch Kids ("Tim's Sponsors", n.d.). Betar has been paid to promote a game at its launch before, like when Square Enix paid him and other influential streamers DrLupo and CouRage to generate hype for their *Marvel's Avengers* game in September 2020 (Miceli, 2020). All of these examples reiterate that Betar's consistent audience engagement is valuable to brands

[3] Betar signed a contract with YouTube in 2021 and no longer streams on Twitch. I will discuss this career move in the conclusion of this chapter, but he remained on Twitch during the FG Frenzy period.

and advertisers, and that generally they pay him for access to his audience. This is important for contrasting what FG is doing here, they are using Betar's influence and his audience without actually compensating the streamer.

Competition in the Livestreaming Industry

Social livestreaming platforms were highly desirable to the GAFAM corporations in the mid 2010s, leading to a series of acquisitions and new services in the space. Amazon launched Twitch in 2014, Google-YouTube created YouTube Gaming in 2015 (Perez, 2018), Microsoft offered Mixer in 2016 (Klimentov, 2020), and Facebook producing its stand-alone Facebook Gaming app in 2018 (Alexander, 2020). All of these acquisitions and new products signal a concentrated interest, and billions of dollars in investments, in maintaining the most popular social livestreaming platform in the U.S. It is important to understand this historical trajectory of the industry because it helps outline why platform corporations are willing to pay streamers millions of dollars for exclusive access to their labor.

While GAFAM corporations jockeyed for position in the livestreaming industry, individual streamers were positioned to take advantage of shifts in the marketplace. The most popular streamers were offered lucrative exclusivity contracts that would help bolster the company's position in the marketplace. Tyler "Ninja" Belvins was the most popular Twitch streamer in the world when he was signed to Mixer in August 2019 ("Ninja Returns", 2019) for "tens of millions of dollars" (Stephen, 2020), triggering a "mass exodus" in which streamers signed exclusive contracts with other platforms (Goslin, 2020).

Other influential Twitch streamers were signed to new platforms: Mike "Shroud" Grzesiek signed with Mixer for millions in the same month, Jack "Courage" Dunlop left for YouTube whereas Jeremy "DisguisedToast" Wang signed with Facebook (Goslin, 2020). This

pressured Twitch to offer their own exclusivity contracts to streamers like Ben “DrLupo” Lupo and Timothy “TimTheTatman” Betar (Goslin, 2020). To complicate things further, influential streamer Herschel “DrDisrespect” Beahm IV was abruptly and mysteriously banned from Twitch (Duwe & Hao, 2020; Horetski, 2021), in June 2020, signaling that 2016-2020 was a turbulent and dynamic period for the most popular streamers. These contracts speak to the second research question, in that streamers’ labor to assemble reliable and scalable audience engagement is complementary toward a platform’s ad revenue model, which is why companies like Twitch are willing to pay millions of dollars to streamers to attempt to bring audiences to their platform.

Many of these aforementioned streamers were paid millions of dollars with the idea that their audiences on Twitch would follow them to the new platform because when streamers foster community in their broadcasts, they are assembling a reliable audience. As the streamer’s popularity increases, access to this reliable audience is increasingly valuable source of ad revenue for platforms like Twitch or YouTube. However, as seen with Mixer’s deal with Belvins and Grzesiek, audiences don’t always follow streamers to new platforms, leading Microsoft to ultimately shutter Mixer in July, 2020 (Stephen, 2020). Mixer’s failure is interesting because it essentially confirms that what makes Twitch unique is that audiences feel like they are participating in a community, “Mixer was doomed from the start because what Microsoft never seemed to understand was that its live-streaming platform was first and foremost a community” (Stephen, 2020). Emphasizing the importance of communal relationships on a platform is crucial for understanding why the most popular streamers are in such high demand, suggesting that Betar’s successful complementary labor invites his community to interact with and participate in the broadcast, which could be one of the reasons why he was targeted by the FG Twitter account in August, 2020.

Methodology

Previous paragraphs described Betar's status as one of the most popular streamers *before* the media frenzy, meaning that this case offers a unique perspective on the potential scalability of an influencer's complementary behaviors. The fact that Betar already had millions of followers was important for elevating what could have been a passing fad into a newsworthy media frenzy. This case study also considers how Twitch participated in this phenomena, demonstrating the company's collaborative relationship with influencers, as well as willingness to publicly tweet and endorse some media frenzies. While Betar's Twitch streams were important for understanding his reactions to the trollish harassment he endured, the broadcasts themselves offered little information about how he manages relationships with Twitch and sponsors.

Therefore, I primarily drew my data set from tweets because they are publicly accessible discourses that reflect the power dynamics that shape Twitch's marketplace. I also included additional news articles and videos to provide additional context to the sample.

To understand the relationship between Betar, FG, Twitch, as well as other prominent actors in the Twitch economy, as well as to consider how influential streamers complement the platform by organizing and sustaining media attention that attracts new users, I used Twitter's advanced search features to find FG-related tweets from August 2020, specifically from the 11-20th when Betar was most actively discussing the game, resulting in a sample of roughly 200 tweets from Betar, other influential content creators, game developers, esports organizations, as well as a flurry of commercial brands.

Once I took screenshots of all the tweets in my sample, I coded the tweets for overall tone as either positive or negative of Betar's prowess to understand how different stakeholders

responded to the media frenzy over time. Then, I prepared a rigorous and trustworthy inductive thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017), following Braun and Clarke's example of "identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes within a data set" (2006). I applied their iterative thematic coding methods to my sample of FG frenzy tweets. Categories such as 'streamer', 'brand', and 'esports' were added to track FG related discourse across all prominent actors in the Twitch economy. Further sub-categories such as 'gaming', 'retail', or 'food and drink' were included to distinguish between what type of brands or sponsors were tweeting about Betar and FG.

Beyond actors and overall tone, I implemented behavior codes like 'hype', 'joke', or 'rage' to account for the various ways that Betar navigated his audiences' demands, as well as to observe limitations of Betar's complementary labor as he had to endure ridicule from his millions of fans, his fellow streamers, as well as from commercial brands. As comments shared media like gifs, memes, or emote I added codes like "media" to consider how ancillary media were used in response to Betar's inability to win a game of FG. After the initial analysis I used Dedoose's "code co-occurrence" and "word cloud" features to visualize and monitor how frequently codes overlapped with each other. This style of coding allowed me to construct thematic understandings which highlight how Betar's success in manufacturing hype for and interest in FG was a direct result of his complementary labor, specifically through his self-deprecating humor and his outbursts of anger and frustration.

Analysis

In order to observe how successful influencers complement Twitch's platform logics, this analysis is divided into two main segments to assess how Betar's obsessive FG gameplay was a source of hype and excitement that drew additional platform complementors into his creative

production, leading to a discernable FG 'meta[4]' on Twitch in August 2020. Vocational influencers like Betar establish collaborative relationships with other prominent actors who collectively orchestrate hype in the Twitch economy. The first section identifies the actors and how they complement Twitch's platform. Then, the second section reviews findings from the thematic analysis that offer deeper understanding of how their participation in the FG media frenzy complemented Twitch's growth.

Findings demonstrate how streamers like Betar organize fans, other content creators, and potential sponsors' interest in his FG gameplay to create a temporary 'Twitch Meta' that represents the most exciting spectacle on the platform. Twitch's global popularity ensures that there are people streaming 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. This liveness means that streamers are constantly incorporating new games and products into their broadcasts to attract new audiences. Therefore, when the most popular influencers on the platform participate in these new games they reinforce the temporary meta by directing their entire extended community's attention to a singular phenomenon, in this case, Beta's struggle to win a game of FG. Ultimately, Betar's willingness to play along with the narrative provided an outlet that organized everyone's interest in the new FG game, while forcing audiences to Twitch to spectate the experience for themselves.

Relevant actors

TimTheTatman

Betar was the streamer at the center of the media frenzy. During this frenzy, Betar's profiles were tagged in a torrent of posts that critiqued his gaming prowess across Twitch,

[4] In the gaming community, 'meta' refers to the community's collective knowledge of a game to optimize their strategies. On Twitch, 'meta' describes a phenomenon where streamers tend to play whatever is most popular with the audience to optimize their visibility.

Twitter, Reddit, Discord, YouTube, etc. Throughout the frenzy, Betar replied to Tweets from FG and his streamer colleagues, occasionally replying to other companies or fans. Betar's participation is crucial because it signals his willingness to play along with other actors in the space is the foundation from which the media frenzy about FG was built. For example, Figure 6 (below) includes one of Betar's tweets to FG, in which he shouted that the company was "PAYING PEOPLE TO TARGET ME AND NOT LET ME WIN" (Figure 6). While Betar would often swear, scream, and become visibly rageful throughout the ordeal, he continued playing FG for five days straight until finally winning a game. Betar's outbursts became part of the entertainment as spectators watched him repeatedly throw tantrums. Ultimately this behavior complemented Twitch's growth by drawing audience's attention to a new game.

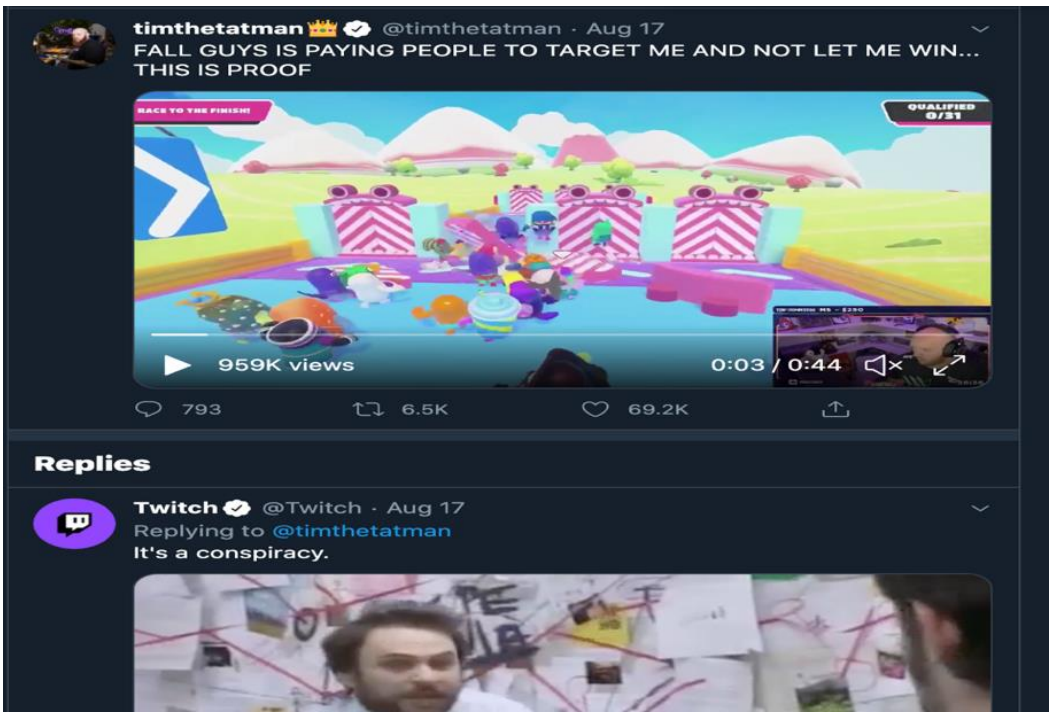

Figure 6

Betar tweets in caps lock and posts videos of his emotional gameplay to draw users in to his stream and FG, while Twitch replies to the thread to elevate the conversation further.

Fall Guys

The Fall Guys (FG) Twitter profile was one of the most influential voices in, and obvious benefactor of, this media frenzy surrounding Betar's inability to win a game. This Twitter account was separate from the official MediaTonic's profile, but the FG profile offers insulation for the marketers to spread "Very Spicy Tweets" ("FallGuys—Twitter, n.d.) to cultivate their game's branded persona. FG launched August 3, 2020 (FallGuys on Steam, 2020), whereas Betar first started playing the game August 11 (TimTheTatman, 2020, August 11), but their first Tweet to Betar wasn't until August 15, meaning they didn't originate the narrative about the streamer's failure.

However, FG quickly incorporated this community-developed narrative about Betar into their Tweets to effectively hype and inflate interest in the story for the next five days with a barrage of disparaging Tweets. These critiques were based on Tim's identity as a professional streamer, implying that if he plays games for a living that he should be able to win at least one game. The fact that the FG profile is specifically branded as "spicy" (i.e., bombastic and loquacious) is an important distinction because it offers the employees a defensive position to justify their behavior as part of the joke. Figure 7 (below) shows a typical exchange between FG and Betar, "Sorry to bother you again – I was just looking for an L, but couldn't find one. Someone said you'd taken them all?". Here, L is slang for a loss, underscoring FG's tendency to characterize Betar as the most famous loser in their game, which complements Twitch's growth logics by drawing even more attention to both Twitch and their game.

Figure 7

FG teases Betar in an exchange on Twitter to pressure him to continue playing their game.

Other Influential Creators

Betar is a prominent figure in the livestreaming industry and has collaborated with many of the most successful creators like Tyler 'Ninja' Belvins, Benjamin 'DrLupo' Lupo, and Herschel 'Dr. Disrespect' Beahm IV. Betar has been friends with and worked alongside these streamers for years. As such these creators, with their own cultivated branded-personas, participate in this media frenzy by critiquing Tim's failure at FG. Streamers like Dr. Disrespect have more aggressively masculine personas and are more visceral in their critiques, others like DrLupo tend to frame their criticisms in passive, almost congenial tone. These male streamers frequently use androcentric language like 'bro' and 'dude', as well as 'I'll fight you' in their

tweets and in their streams (Figure 8, below; Figure 12, below), corresponding with what feminist game studies scholars have written about toxic masculinity that permeates throughout the gaming community (Cote, 2020; Salter & Blodgett, 2017). The fact that other influential streamers are participating in this media frenzy signals that streamers are required to pay attention to developing trends on the platform as part of their routine labor. But, more interestingly, also indicates that Twitch fails to consider coarse language and discussions about fighting and inebriation as threats to potential advertisers.

Figure 8

Betar discusses getting into fights with his "bro" Nadeshot.

Other companies

There were a combination of companies that engaged with Betar during this frenzy that were both endemic and non-endemic brands to the gaming industry. Gaming accessory companies (Razer and JBL), game developers and publishers (RavenSoftware- Call of Duty:Warzone), and professional esports organizations (G2 and FazeClan) were among some of the many endemic gaming companies that joined FG's efforts to manufacture a media frenzy around Tim's failure to win. While each of these organizations operate in different verticals within the multi-faceted global gaming industry, Twitter's platform flattens these industrial borders, allowing nascent brands to participate in the media frenzy. Each of these companies have different relationships with Betar, for instance Razer directly sponsors Betar as a #RazerPartner, whereas publisher RavenSoftware greatly benefit from the exposure that Tim generates for their company by selecting Call of Duty: Warzone as his primary game.

Conversely, non-endemic brands like Spotify joined the fracas, utilizing the meta to promote their own streaming service (Figure 8, above). While each of these organizations has different business models and relationships with Betar, it is important to note that all of them operate profiles on social media platforms that monetize user engagement, meaning that they also directly benefit from and participate in the FG Twitch meta. Twitter offers a space for brands to interact with content creators like people while rewarding posts with the most engagement with more visibility. This means that brands essentially use media frenzies as a cost-effective form of advertising that benefits from increasing the attention on Tim's battle with FG.

Figure 9

Spotify participates in the meta by tagging the FG account and ridiculing Betar.

Thematic Categories

Creating Hype

The ‘hype’ code was by far the most popular and was applied to any comment or Tweet that expressed excitement about Betar’s struggle with FG. Hype takes many forms depending on who it is coming from; random fans can express hype by quote-Tweeting or sharing posts from influencers. Whereas influencers like Betar are capable of manufacturing ‘hype’, i.e. interest in a game, through their social media posts and their livestreamed gameplay on Twitch. Hype occurs in many shapes and forms, but functionally it always complements the platform that it occurs on by either participating in or creating an entertaining spectacle that draws more users and advertisers onto their service.

Initially Betar created hype for FG by playing the game on his Twitch channel. Betar wasn't the first streamer to play FG on Twitch, meaning that there were other aspirational and professional livestreamers who were hyping FG. However, Betar's prominence on the platform was a key component in his ability to draw attention to the game. On August 11, he tweeted about FG twice to declare his interest in the game as a way to entertain Betar's audience. The first tweet was at 10:35 AM including a meme with Betar's face superimposed over the game's character. At 11:07 Betar tweeted a video compilation of Betar screaming and swearing into the camera as his "first experience with the game" (Figure 10, below). Betar's tweets created promotional materials for FG including a meme and a video testimonial, both of which hype FG. Therefore, hyping becomes a specific way to promote or advertise a game to audiences.

Figure 10

Betar's first tweet about FG which includes a clip of his gameplay to hype the game.

Betar Tweeted about FG again on August 12th and on the 13th, demonstrating that he was still hyping the game because his audience was entertained by it. On August 12th, Betar's Tweet was not as animated as his previous two. However, the Tweet on the 13th (Figure 11,

below) takes a different tone because Betar includes a screenshot of an engagement report for one of his YouTube videos about FG. Betar's language is telling here, because he states that hesitated to play FG on his "main channel" but more interestingly is that he justifies playing the cartoonish game with audience metrics. This emphasis on viewership metrics is telling because it shows how hyping a game can be mutually beneficial for streamers like Betar.

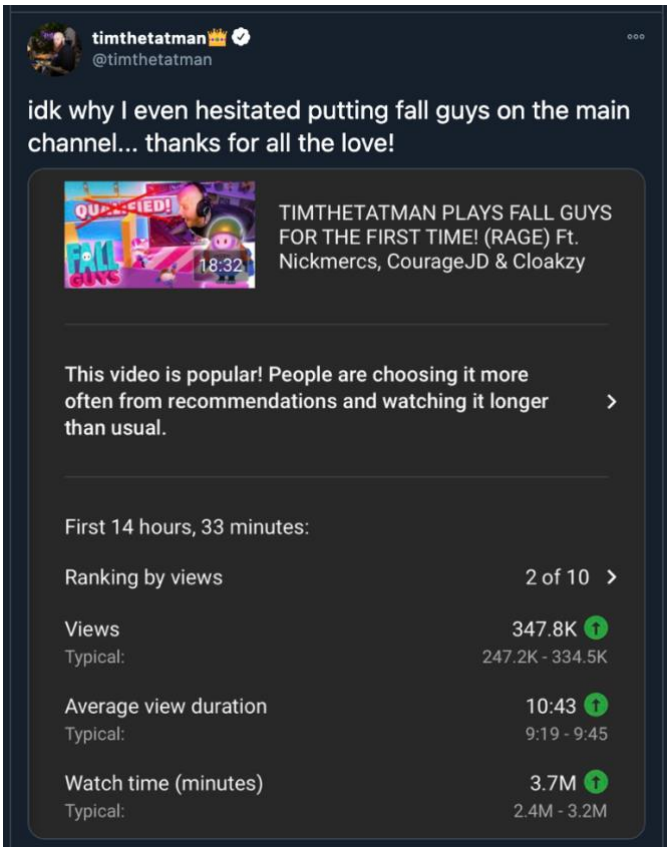

Figure 11

Betar's August 13th tweet including metrics which confirm that playing FG was good for his business.

Material benefits of hype

Betar's August 13th tweet with viewer metrics from his first YouTube video FG is the clearest example of the material benefits of hyping the game. The screenshot explains how Betar's FG video was receiving more attention than his typical CoD Warzone videos:

- Increase in average total views, 347.8K, 10K-100K more people viewed this video than his other videos
- Increase in average view duration, viewers are watching this video about 10 minutes and 43 seconds, 60-90 seconds longer than his other videos
- Average total watch time increased to 3.7 M minutes, up anywhere from 1.3 M - 500K minutes, viewers are spending more minutes watching this video than others

These are specific metrics that influential streamers like Betar rely on to evaluate their performances. Consulting engagement metrics is then another crucial skillset in Betar's labor to entertain his audience. Increasing the total number of views and average view duration are both important for Betar to consider when deciding which game to play on his streams important for Betar to deliver content that his audience is interested in. However, the most important metric in terms of complementary labor would likely be the 3.7 million minutes of average total watch time, because those are the minutes that are monetized through advertisements.

Betar's message "idk why I even hesitated putting FG on the main channel… thanks for all the love!" (Figure 11, above) confirms that the streamer maintains multiple channels across Twitch and YouTube, but also that he doubted his audiences' interest in the game. Tweeting 'thanks for all the love' suggests that Betar wants to entertain his audience, but the screenshot confirms experimenting with a new game like FG has the potential to create immediate material benefits for streamers across their monetized channels. While streamers should be compensated equitably for official sponsored content, FG never directly acknowledged Betar until August 15th, meaning that the streamer was creating this hype primarily for his benefit.

Cultural benefits of hype

As mentioned previously, Betar frequently streams with other vocational influencers like Cloakzy, CouRage, and NickMercs, who each have millions of followers. Generally these

creators use an app like Discord to communicate with each other while they play together as a group in the game. Each of these streamers are livestreaming their gameplay, meaning that they are also competing with each other for viewers. These streamers represent the most successful and visible professional creators on Twitch, so Betar's access to them increases his own cultural capital. Even though Betar is arguably the least skilled gamer of the group, his proximity to the most famous Twitch streamers signal his viability as a potential commercial partner from brands, sponsors, and advertisers. The fact that some of the most famous streamers on Twitch are playing FG is crucial for hyping the game and remaining relevant to audiences when new games are released every month. Therefore, if an influencer isn't explicitly sponsored to play a new game, their decision to play a new game indicates that it is (temporarily) culturally relevant.

Career benefits of hype

Betar's decision to hype FG clearly had material and cultural benefits, but less obvious were those to his reputation and career. There are approximately 27,000 Partners on Twitch ("Twitch Partner Program Overview", n.d.), meaning that there are only 27,000 people who have access to all of Twitch's monetization offerings and other resources like dedicated staff representatives. Of all the Partners on Twitch, only 369 of them have more than 1M followers, and only 125 streamers have more than 2M followers ("Twitch Streamers with the Most Followers", 2022). In August 2020, Betar had more than 5M followers on Twitch, meaning that he was one of the most visible streamers on the platform. These follower counts may seem like arbitrary numbers, and there is likely significant follower overlap between the most popular Twitch streamers, but to Twitch, it identifies which streamers are the best at attracting new users to their platform. More importantly is that Twitch interacts directly with their most followed streamers while they largely ignore those with less impressive follower counts. Therefore, the

fact that Twitch directly replied to Betar's Tweet reinforces his prestigious status on their platform and also tacitly endorses Betar's behavior (Figure 12, below).

Figure 12

Twitch replies to a conversation between Betar and streamer "Cloakzy" without being tagged, meaning that they were monitoring the two influencers' tweets to capitalize on their hype.

Even though Twitch's reply to Betar reinforces his status on their platform, these direct replies also establish Betar's struggle to win a game of FG as a potential story of interest for the greater Twitch community. Their initial reply to Betar's Tweet suggests their confidence in his ability to win, it is markedly different from their later Tweets. While these words of encouragement may be taken as a sign of Twitch supporting one of their most famous streamers,

it actually establishes Betar's struggle as newsworthy. Twitch's reply on August 14th was the first reply from an official brand or organization, meaning that their initial response invited further participation from FG and other brands which would be crucial participants in elevating Betar's 'hype' to a 'media frenzy'.

Obsessive play

Betar's observed relationship with the FG game can be broken into two categories, both casual play and obsessive play. The casual period included Betar's livestreams from August 11, 12, (he didn't play FG on the 13) and the 14. Even though FG released August 3 Betar didn't publicly play the game until August 11, suggesting that a hesitancy to play the game on stream until it was trending on Twitch. Betar initially approached the game with a casual and carefree attitude, Tweeting memes with his face superimposed over the squishy FG avatar. The casual demeanor quickly vanished a few hours later when Betar Tweeted a video of himself screaming and swearing because he was frustrated with the game. While this outburst clearly showed Betar's frustrations with the game, it was still considered casual gameplay because FG had not yet directly tagged him in their Tweets.

Obsessive gameplay describes how Betar played and engaged with FG from August 17-20. During those four days the streamer primarily played FG, taking a brief break on August 18th to briefly play another game after rage-quitting from FG (Figure 13, below,). While it is common for players to spend more time with a game when it is new, Betar's obsessive gameplay was different because it was largely coerced by the FG Twitter account. Originally FG directly-tagged Betar in disparaging tweets on August 15th, prompting the streamer to obsessively play the game to defend his honor when he resumed streaming on the 17th. However, what made the 17th through the 20th obsessive was that FG tagged him directly in more than 25 tweets. This

extensive tweeting borders harassment while disguising as a joke between friends, but it effectively fueled and amplified the narrative into a media frenzy.

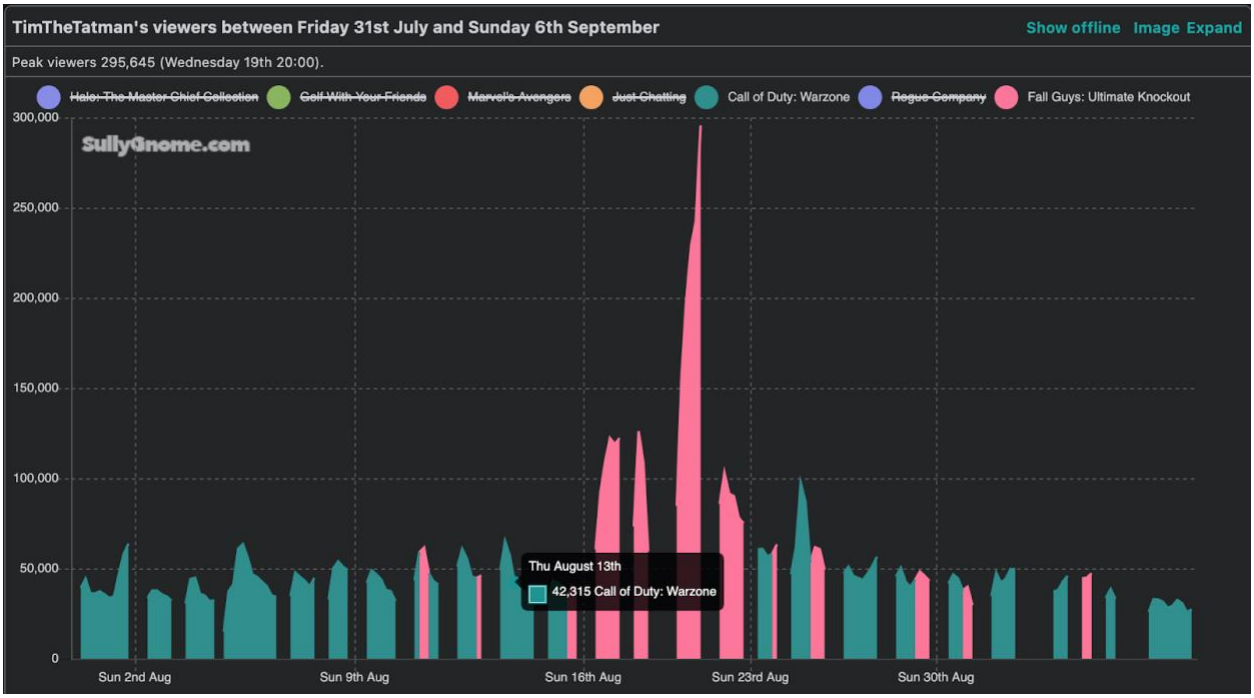

Figure 13

Chart showing Betar's obsessive gameplay during August 2020.

It is possible that Betar's obsessive play was triggered by the antagonistic tweets but his comments about a viewership spike from playing FG (Figure 11, above) imply that his obsessive gameplay was an attempt to capitalize on the demand for FG content, which in turn complemented Twitch's platform logics. Betar's FG gameplay gained roughly 233,000 new followers in 11 days and only 9 broadcasts (Figure 13), suggesting that his confrontations with FG on Twitter and his pathetic performances on Twitch were uniquely entertaining compared to his routine *CoD: Warzone* broadcasts. Regardless of his motivations, Betar's obsessive gameplay complemented Twitch's directive to grow their userbase and create publicity for their platform, highlighting a natural symbiotic relationship between the two. While influential streamers like

Betar create ample opportunities for other platform complementors (streamers, game developers, sponsors, etc.) seeking to attach themselves to the latest Twitch meta, it's worth noting that Betar's personal follower gains are the most likely reason for his continued participation in the feud with FG. Betar's obsessive gameplay outlines how Twitch influencers work to hype and promote games and products, but shifting focus to Betar's identity as a Cis heterosexual male identifies a frictionless, and lucrative, relationship between himself, platforms, and advertisers.

Discussion

This case explains how influencers that are popular with Twitch's audience of primarily young white males are often permitted frictionless entry into Twitch's market to perform complementary labor to hype a new game, even potentially at the streamer's expense. As mentioned earlier, Betar already had millions of followers on Twitch and was a vocational influencer *before* his involvement with FG, meaning that he has already proven successful at sustaining attention for a product or game. But this instance is unique, because much of Betar's complementary labor to hype FG required his participation in the jokes about his gaming ineptitude. While his privileged identity provides an advantage in that it his identity is never considered a threat to his perceived brand friendliness, the benevolent trolling with brands and sponsors that he endured presented opportunities for Betar to further his career.

The material, social, and career benefits that Betar accrued from his role as the linchpin of the temporary FG meta on Twitch were important components that maintained Betar's trajectory while simultaneously signaling his willingness to complement platform logics. Which eventually led to more stable forms of employment for Betar, seen through his recent multimillion dollar contract with YouTube Gaming in 2021 (Carr, 2021) and his ascension to part-owner of the Dallas Cowboys' owned esports organization, Complexity Gaming (Duran,

2021), offering Betar the rare opportunity for job stability. Much of the literature on platformization, digital labor, and content creators focuses on the precarious working conditions and lack of job stability for cultural producers (Scholz, 2012; Abidin, 2016), especially for Twitch streamers (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019), so Betar's success and stability is an exception.

Therefore, Betar's self-deprecating complementary labor serves as an example of the frictionless success that can potentially occur for streamers who are willing to follow his example. The FG meta from August 11-20, 2020 presented multiple opportunities for Betar to further his career, but it is also an example of the limits of complementary behavior. While this hyper-focused attention toward Betar was largely benevolent and created synergy between Twitch, Betar, and advertisers, this self-deprecating labor is not always accessible to streamers from marginalized backgrounds who tend to attract vitriol that can scare potential sponsors and advertisers. Therefore, part of what distinguishes Betar's treatment from the POTD harassment in the next chapter is that Betar's identity is never perceived as a threat to potential advertisers.

Twitch's decision to tweet at Betar and participate in the FG related discourse identifies Betar as an ideal streamer who participates with the joke while appealing to Twitch's core audience demographic of young white men. The fact that Betar participates in the self-deprecating humor is crucial for characterizing the jokes about Betar as acceptable entertainment rather than potential harassment, highlighting that harassment can be profitable in a market that is reliant on ad revenue permitting it is understood as humorous or 'trollish' attempt to elicit "lulz" from an audience (Phillips, 2016). These tweets also reveal a unique characteristic about vocational influencers in that brands and platforms publicly communicate with them while largely ignoring civilians without large followings. Betar successfully leveraged his ability to communicate publicly with Twitch to generate the additional exposure required to turn the

interest in FG from a passing fad into a discernible meta. This chapter provides an example of Twitch's professional relationship with an influential streamer, in which Twitch actively supported Betar and repeatedly tweeted with him to increase his exposure to new audiences during his period of obsessive gameplay. Finally, the fact that Twitch continued to collaborate with Betar to manufacture hype tacitly explains that the company views him as a valuable complementor capable of attracting new sponsors, a direct contrast to their relationship with marginalized POTD streamers in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

POGGERS GONE WRONG: Identity-Based Harassment & the Limits of Complementary Labor

Hate raids, “in which trolls overwhelm streamers’ chats with bot-powered fake accounts that spam hateful messages” (Grayson, 2021b), were briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, but they are relevant to my interest in the limits of a streamer’s complementary labor. These targeted attacks use automated programs to create and manage anonymous bots that bombard a streamer’s chat with vitriol(Chalk, 2021; Horetski, 2022; Hatmaker, 2021; Parrish, 2021). The logic of these attacks is to flood a streamer’s Chat with enough hate that they drown out any positive comments from the streamer’s organic audience (Parrish, 2021). These malevolent attacks are fundamentally different from the benevolent, trollish attempt to generate “lulz” (Phillips, 2016) at Betar’s expense because they are explicitly manufactured to be hurtful to the streamer, *and* they tend to scare potential sponsors and brands wishing to avoid being associated with bigotry. Unfortunately, these attacks are most frequently deployed against the most vulnerable streamers including aspirational streamers without the resources to combat these attacks, as well as female, queer, or BIPOC streamers (Chalk, 2021; Hatmaker, 2021), effectively challenging a streamer’s ability to perform complementary labor to hype new products or games.

One of the reasons that hate raids are so difficult to combat is that Twitch offers a ‘raid’ feature that allows streamers to direct their audience to another streamer’s channel when they are ending their broadcast. Raiding is a feature of the platform as well as a social practice by streamers, and is an important form of complementary labor for growing communities. This means that raiding, whether benevolent or hateful, is an important function in Twitch’s marketplace that supports the company’s ad revenue model. However, because the nature of the raid is heavily influenced by the streamer’s identity it can also limit the effectiveness of their complementary behaviors.

Therefore, this case study examines how Twitch's relationship with its streamers is subject to hate raids that have the potential to alienate potential advertisers and sponsors, as seen through Twitch's hastily conceived PogChamp of The Day (POTD) promotion to quell their community's outcry about the removal of their favorite and most popular emote, PogChamp. I will translate that last sentence in greater detail below, but it is important to reiterate that this case considers how the effectiveness of a streamer's complementary labor is complicated further when their embodied identity becomes an official feature on the platform. As the platformization of cultural production continues, the streamers and creators who are the best at complementing Twitch's growth and ad revenue logics will continue to be the most successful influencers. However, in order to establish more inclusive and equitable opportunities that would increase the diversity of influencer-level streamers, it is critical to document instances when Twitch (inadvertently) hampers the effectiveness of marginalized streamers' complementary behaviors by reducing their visibility and canceling promotional events that could attract new sponsors and viewers.

The Historic & Cultural Significance of PogChamp

One of Twitch's most defining features is the chatroom attached to every streamer's channel. This chatroom affords direct interaction and communication between the streamer and people in their Chat. Twitch also offers various animated emotes, like emojis on your phone, that people use as a form of shorthand to express themselves quickly in the livestream. Emotes have become a significant aspect to the communities formed on Twitch. The streaming platform defines emotes as:

> The [bleeding heart] of Twitch culture. They're a language of their own. They're also a way for Partners and Affiliates to reinforce their branding and personalities,

> and give fans ways to celebrate epic moments, poke fun at fails, spread love in chat, and become active members of your community (Twitch "Emotes", n.d.).

This description highlights emotes as a core feature of Twitch's creator economy which encourages and facilitates audience participation on the platform, as well as the fact that they are a language of their own for its users. Emotes then become meaningful symbols of the Twitch community that express particular meanings. One of Twitch's most famous emotes is PogChamp, (Figure 14, below), meant to communicate the user's shock, excitement, and overall hype for whatever they just watched on the livestream ("PogChamp", *Knowyourmeme*, n.d.). This particular image is actually Ryan 'Gootecks' Gutierrez, co-founder of the YouTube channel CrossCounterTV, who made the famous face when he was surprised by the outcome of his game of Pog in a YouTube video in 2010 (CrossCounterTV, 2010; Hope, 2019).

Figure 14

Ryan 'Gootecks' Gutierrez's shocked expression that became the emote PogChamp.

Since 2010, Gutierrez's expression became a popular addition to meme culture across Reddit, 4Chan, and 8 Chan, but Justin.tv added the meme to their platform as an emote in 2012 ("PogChamp" *KnowYourMeme,* n.d.). PogChamp had been one of Twitch's most popular emotes

since 2017 according to their research blog (Sagalovsky, 2017). Twitch's researchers created this graphic to rank the most popular emotes according to distinct colors; the cyan blue representing PogChamp in Figure 15 (below) was by far the most used emote. This means that the PogChamp emote has existed as both a communal meme as well as a commercial property for over a decade before Twitch made it a licensed emote in 2018 by compensating Gutierrez with an estimated $50,000 - $100,000 and other benefits in an undisclosed deal (Grayson, 2021a).

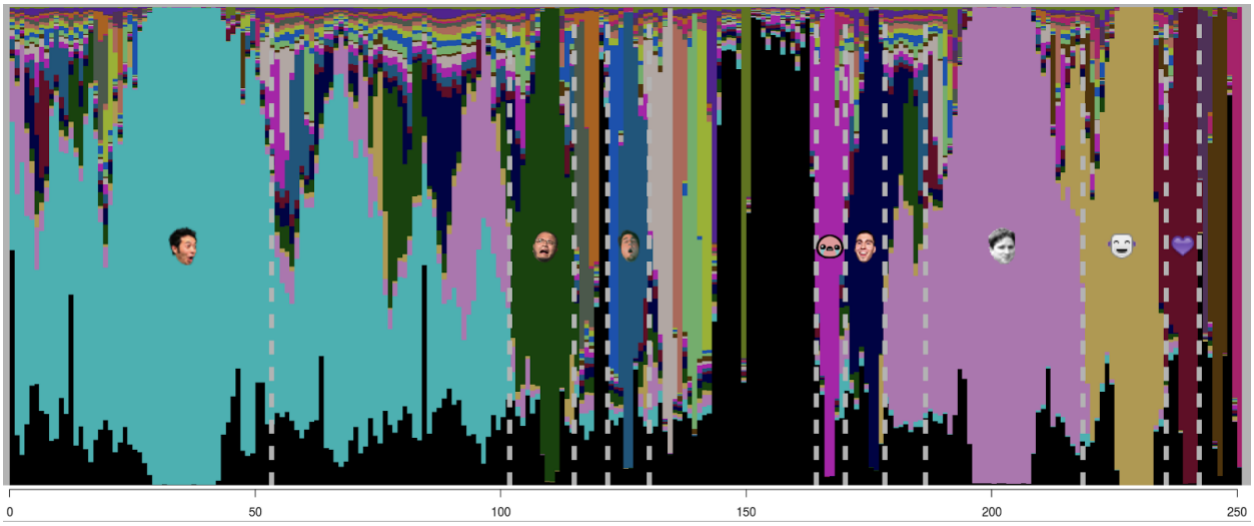

Figure 15

Visual representation of the top 20 most used emotes on Twitch (Sagalovsky, 2017).

The 'hype' emote was further institutionalized as one of Twitch's most prominent symbols as seen in its inclusion in the "Mount Rushmote" exhibit in the Museum of Emotes promotion in TwitchCon 2018 (Figure 16, below). This arrangement allowed PogChamp to become increasingly prominent on Twitch, leading to its status as the third most used emote in 2018 (Hope, 2019), reinforcing its value as a corporate asset. But these communal and corporate tensions came to a boil on January 6, 2021 when Gutierrez Tweeted his support for the insurrection at the Capitol. Twitch quickly distanced themselves from Gutierrez and announced that they were removing the emote from their platform within hours of his original Tweet

(Twitch, “Remove PogChamp Emote”, 2021). But this decision created immediate backlash from their community who wanted an alternative to Gutierrez’s PogChamp.

Figure 16

PogChamp included in Mount Rushmote at TwitchCon 2018.

Figure 17

Twitch’s statement about removing PogChamp from their platform. (Twitch, “Remove PogChamp Emote”, 2021).

Twitch announced their removal of PogChamp at 6:12 PM (Figure 17, above), less than four hours after Gutierrez's Tweets, signaling how quickly the platform can take action against threats to their own branded image:

> We've made the decision to remove the PogChamp emote following statements from the face of the emote encouraging further violence after what took place in the Capitol today. We want the sentiment and use of Pog to live on – its meaning is much bigger than the person depicted or image itself– and it has a big place in Twitch culture. However, we can't in good conscience continue to enable use of the image. We will work with the community to design a new emote for the most hype moments on Twitch. (**Figure 16**; Twitch, "Removing PogChamp Emote", 2021).

The initial announcement mentions that Twitch would collaborate with the community to develop a replacement and specifically acknowledged that the feelings expressed *by* an emote are (or should be) more important than the image *of* the emote. At 7:26 PM, veteran streamer Sean 'Day9' Plott proposed a solution where Twitch created a database of streamers imitating Gutierrez's original expression which would pick a different streamer at random each time the emote was used (Figure 18, below). Notably this proposition would allow both influential and aspirational streamers alike to embody the famous emote without forcing a single streamer to represent one of the most culturally relevant emotes on Twitch.

At 9:02 on January 8, 2021, Twitch quote-Tweeted Plott's original suggestion with the following caption "You know what? In the spirit of figuring out 2021 together, let's just roll with it for now! Get ready for a new PogChamp every 24 hours, starting today" (Figure 18, below). The timing of this is significant because it confirms that Twitch spent less than 48 hours planning

the promotion before launching it. This hastiness confirms how much pressure the platform was under to replace the community's beloved emote. Twitch's rapid implementation of Plott's plan suggests that was likely the first reasonable solution they saw, with an added benefit of spinning their decision as part of their broader commitment to working with their community. However, it's worth noting that Plott's original idea democratized access to becoming PogChamp and avoided requiring a single streamer to shoulder the responsibility of representation, whereas Twitch's "PogChamp of the Day" (POTD) promotion effectively did the opposite thing by elevating one streamer at a time to represent PogChamp for a day.

Figure 18

Twitch's announcement for their POTD event, they quote-Tweet Plott to acknowledge that his original idea inspired the event.

As Twitch's POTD promotion began, they proudly tagged each day's chosen streamer in Tweets with celebratory graphics and links to their Twitch and Twitter accounts. This visibility quickly became a threat to the POTD event as several streamers were immediately victims of hate raids in a direct response to their intersectional identities. This is anything but novel and scholars have explained that women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, as well as marginalized races and ethnicities continue to be mistreated both on and offline (Ruberg, 2019; 2021; Roberg et al., 2019; Florini, 2019a; Nakamura 2007; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Marwick, 2021). Therefore, this case study considers the POTD promotion as an opportunity for streamers to legitimize their professional reputation through their association with Twitch. However, Twitch's response to the predictable hate raids against marginalized POTD streamers highlights some of the gendered, racial, and sexual limits of complementary labor that is intended to create value for sponsors.

By performing an inductive and thematic analysis of POTD discourse on Twitter, this case study considers how creators from marginalized backgrounds face unique challenges in their efforts to complement Twitch's growth and ad revenue logics. This case study reviews POTD discourse on Twitter about each of the 35 streamers in the promotion to demonstrate how male streamers are not victimized by hate raids if they fit within what was previously considered the core gaming demographic (Cote, 2020), creating additional challenges that threaten the effectiveness of female, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ streamers' complementary labor. Preserving this moment in Twitch's history is important in and of itself, but this critical analysis also outlines some of the additional barriers that marginalized streamers must overcome to professionalize their careers.

A (Brief) History of Online Harassment

While harassment is an important topic in this chapter, it is not the sole focus, rather it is a component of the professional relationship between Twitch and its livestreamers. In order to better understand how Twitch failed to protect POTD streamers from harassment, and how those same streamers subsequently protected themselves, it is important to briefly review what has already been said about gendered, racial, and sexual harassment in online and in gaming spaces. Ultimately this research explains why Twitch should have anticipated this behavior, as well as outlines a broader spectrum of resistance to situate streamers' reactions to their mistreatment in.

The Internet, gaming, and Twitch are all generally masculinized spaces, made more available to men and boys than to women and girls (Salter & Blodgett, 2017; Florini, 2019; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). This means that, in terms of gender, female participants often face harassment and other forms of exclusion. As Jennifer Berdahl (2007) explored workplace harassment and found that assertive and independent women, and those in "male-dominated organizations" were the most likely to experience workplace harassment. Berdahl argued that this harassment is not an affirmation of perceived gender ideals but instead a tool to punish "uppity" women who challenge these ideals by occupying space in the workplace. While Twitch is careful to refer to streamers as 'creators', the fact that streamers have to file taxable income forms before monetizing their content (Twitch Help "Amazon Tax Information", n.d.) means that for streamers, Twitch is a workplace whether or not Twitch acknowledges them as employees. This outlines how Twitch should have anticipated workplace harassment directed against "uppity" (Berdahl, 2007) streamers who are occupying Gutierrez's original job as the face of the PogChamp emote.

Research from Black, Feminist, and Queer studies frequently discuss how marginalized people, especially those who attempt to moderate or resist harassment, are targeted with

harassment online. For instance, Sarah Florini (2019b) broadly outlines how Black internet users and entrepreneurial content creators construct enclaved community spaces online to not only avoid harassment, but to construct supportive networks who collectively "celebrate their beloved media text[s], often reading Black cultural specificity into a text with a noticeable absence of Black bodies". Lisa Nakamura has published extensively on the racist, misogynistic, and homophobic discrimination online (2007, 2012, 2015), demonstrating how marginalized internet users use internet technologies to foster inclusive communities despite constant harassment and vitriol. Finally, Alice Marwick (2021) recently coined "morally motivated networked harassment" to describe how coordinated and vicious harassment are considered tolerable for internet users who believe that someone has violated their community's moral values. These are not meant to be an exhaustive summary of all the research on harassment, but instead to offer an example of how Twitch should have understood that naming marginalized streamers as the POTD would attract the attention of hostile internet users who target marginalized content creators.

These findings about ongoing harassment are not just limited to internet spaces, but apply equally to the gaming industry and community. Mia Consalvo (2012) reviewed some of the most egregious examples of misogyny and sexual harassment while calling for scholars to continue interrogating how misogyny has structured and reinforces a habitus of toxic masculinity throughout the gaming community. Notably, Amanda Cote (2020) explains how the gaming industry has historically advertised and catered to male consumers, as well as how misogynistic gamers frequently attack women in competitive multiplayer games. These citations are just two of many examples of how commonplace misogyny is in gaming spaces. Given Twitch's role as a nexus of workplace, internet, and gaming cultural practices, their employees should have

anticipated these xenophobic, misogynistic, and homophobic responses to their POTD event. Therefore, after reviewing the methods used in this analysis, this chapter's analysis and discussion sections outline how Twitch failed to protect POTD streamers from vitriolic backlash, and in doing so limited how streamers of diverse identities were able to benefit from and take advantage of being highlighted.

Methodology

This analysis draws from hundreds of Tweets and relevant news articles about Twitch's POTD promotion from January 6th, 2021 - February 12th, 2021. I began by screenshotting Twitch's official Tweet announcing each POTD, as well as the streamer's announcement, which I supplemented with additional tweets and news articles that described their experience with POTD. These screenshots included promotional statements from Twitch's official Twitter account as well as the streamer's announcement that they were POTD. I collected subsequent screenshots of some of the most popular replies in the Twitter thread to capture some of the most prominent reactions to a streamer being picked as POTD. The goal of this analysis was to determine how Twitch constructed additional barriers for streamers attempting to professionalize their labor. Therefore, the convenient sampling and decision to only include the most popular replies in the data set offers an opportunity to record some of the most vocal reactions to POTD news.

This sample was designed to investigate the entire POTD event to draw attention to how Twitch structures and promotions affect streamers' attempts at professionalization. I argue that POTD is an important professional milestone that legitimizes the streamer's reputation while potentially leading to additional career opportunities. Some of the 35 POTD streamers were already bona fide influencers with millions of followers at the time of the event, but the majority

of them had under 100,000 followers, meaning that there was a disparity between the levels of professional achievement amongst the 35 POTD streamers. It is important to distinguish between vocational-influencers like Grefg, LoserFruit, and Guales have millions of followers and are firmly established throughout the gaming sector of social media entertainment, and professional aspirational streamers who monetize their creative output but have not grown as popular as vocational influencers, like CriticalBard and DearDeere. The hate raids directed at the female, LGBTQ+, and BIPOC streamers caused public backlash that could potentially tarnish Twitch's relationship with advertisers. Therefore, this sample set is positioned well for exploring Twitch's relationship with creators who may cause tension with, or openly resist, the platform's ad revenue and sponsorship logics.

This data set included tweets *about* the POTD event, rather than the Twitch streams themselves because Twitter offers a more publicly accessible space for streamers to perform complementary labor than immersive Twitch livestreams. However, by relying on the streamer's POTD-related tweets, this case study still captures the streamer's overall experience with the campaign. By focusing broadly on all of the POTD streamers, rather than exhaustively studying a few of them, this case provides meaningful evidence of how Twitch can inadvertently threaten an aspirational streamer's potential to partake in the same lucrative complementary labor that have rewarded influencers like theGrefg. This juxtaposition of vocational influencer and marginalized professional aspirational streamers in the same sample offers further evidence of how brands and sponsors sanction frictionless entry into the advertising marketplace on Twitch to streamers who avoid attracting negative attention that would threaten potential sponsors.

Nowell et al. (2017) offer a detailed guide for conducting trustworthy and rigorous thematic analysis capable of what Braun and Clarke (2006) describe as "identifying, analyzing,

organizing, describing, and reporting themes within a data set." I apply their iterative thematic coding to my sample of POTD tweets. Initially, I coded the streamer's (or Twitch's) tweets for positive and negative tones to determine its overall tone. Then I added multiple categories such as "gender", "race", or "sexuality" to create an overlap so that each tweet would reveal either a positive or negative tone when discussing a POTD streamer's embodied identity.

While this is virtually the same analysis I used in the previous chapter, Dedoose's interface was limited when trying to arrange and code tweets organized by the POTD. Therefore, I applied these codes as comments in the 'Speaker's Notes' section of a Google Slides presentation. Each screenshot was copied and pasted onto its own slide so that each tweet could be understood in the context of who it was directed toward. While Deedoose offers features that automatically calculate and visualize data, this method still allowed me to apply multiple codes, and child codes, to each tweet for a nuanced, if slightly more tedious, analysis.

When coding replies to a streamer's POTD tweets, I began with "supportive" and "negative" themes to account for overall tone. As comments shared media like gifs, memes, or emote I added codes like "media" to consider how ancillary media were used in response to POTD discourse. For ongoing behaviors like "harassment" or "resistance strategy" I introduced child codes as necessary to account for varying forms of these core reactions. For instance, when fans tweeted about reporting hostile users for saying rude comments, I coded that as "positive" as well as "resistance strategy-reporting". Conversely, if a tweet used emojis to create instances of sexual and racial harassment, then the tweets were coded as "negative" as well as "harassment-misogyny" and "negative" as well as "harassment- racial" respectively.

Analysis

Inductive and thematic analysis revealed that the POTD promotion should be understood from two distinct, but highly interrelated, categories– how Twitch marketed the POTD streamers, as well as the strategies that streamers used to overcome their harassment. Drawing attention to Twitch's response to the backlash as well as how streamers improvised solutions to endure and combat their mistreatment offer a stark comparison to Betar's frictionless complementary behavior observed in the previous chapter. Focusing on both Twitch's failures and streamers' contested success identifies actionable opportunities for the platform's improvement, while celebrating the marginalized streamers who have pioneered conversations and strategies about creator safety.

This case study has a very specific interest in the POTD harassment as a reflection of the professional relationship between streamers and Twitch, meaning that I'm more focused on Twitch's reaction *to* the harassment rather than *the* harassment itself. This limited engagement with the content of the vitriol is a conscious decision to avoid giving these attacks oxygen, because as the study reveals they may cause truly miserable working conditions but never caused someone to abandon their careers as professional aspirational streamers. Even though POTD was a one-off event, the limitations to a streamer's complementary labor were specifically created by Twitch's campaign.

Twitch publicized their POTD streamers with three unique strategies that incrementally removed identifying information as a response to their harassment. Initially, Twitch used "full exposure" (Jan 9-13), but after 3 of the POTD streamers received targeted harassment Twitch pivoted to "half exposure" (Jan 14-17), then scaling back even further with "no exposure" (Jan 18- Feb 11). Organizing the POTD campaign according to how Twitch promoted them draws attention to how toxic backlash to a streamer's identity threatens the viability of Twitch's official

promotions. Twitch's response to this harassment was to remove marginalized creators from public view rather than combatting exclusionary culture and bigotry on their platform, effectively challenging the streamer's ability to take advantage of this opportunity to further their career. Rather than rapidly developing solutions to prevent harassment (like they did when implementing the POTD campaign), Twitch's half exposure and no exposure strategies attempted to hide the identity of POTD, robbing the streamers of invaluable visibility while POTD streamers still faced harassment after Twitch stopped promoting their identities.

Despite Twitch's repeated failure to protect their streamers from marginalized communities, many of them have developed novel strategies to combat their mistreatment and continue growing their audiences and professional careers. Therefore, the second thematic category emphasizes the techniques that POTD streamers used to protect themselves and to celebrate their professional achievement in the face of targeted harassment. Promoting the ways that streamers resist or combat online vitriol is a conscious decision to avoid amplifying the harassment itself in lieu of focusing on the tools used by streamers to continue creating spaces for traditionally marginalized communities on Twitch as well as within the greater social media entertainment industry.

Full Exposure (Jan 9-13)

Initially Twitch employees made every attempt to publicize the streamer who was picked as POTD. Full exposure is a thematic category that describes Twitch's most visible advertisements for POTD. It includes tweets from Twitch's official account, a caption that is tailored to the streamer's brand, directly tagging the streamer on Twitter, as well as celebratory graphics or short videos showcasing the streamer's version of the PogChamp emote as seen in Figure 19 (below). The full exposure strategy utilizes platform features like sharing html links

and directly tagging streamers to advertise the streamer. While the full exposure category was the most visibly marketed group of POTD streamers, they were also subjected to the most vitriolic harassment of all 35 POTD streamers.

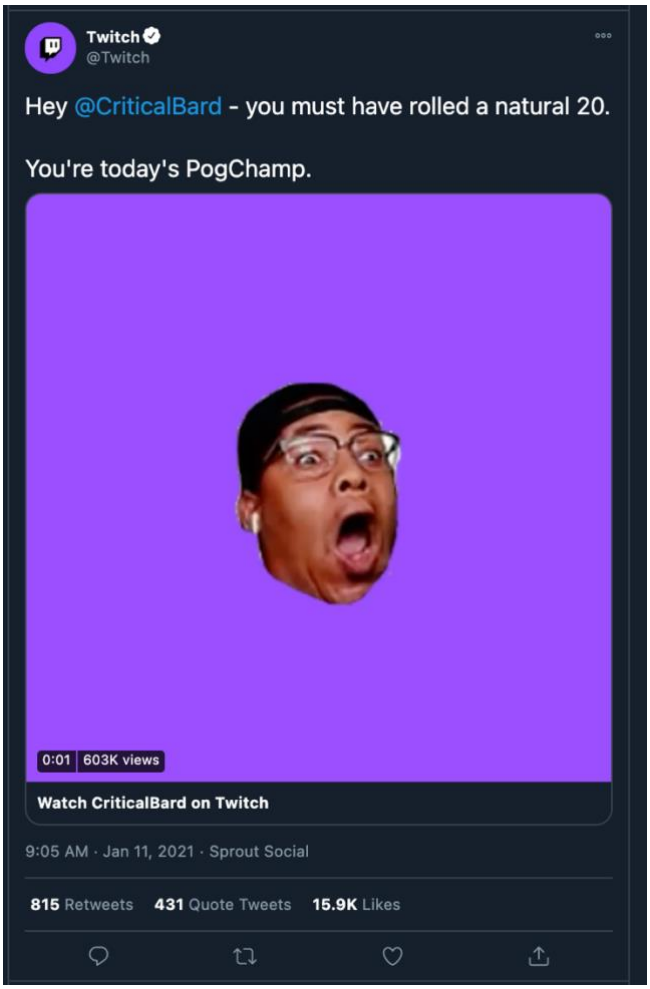

Figure 19

Example of Twitch's 'full exposure' strategy that directly links to a streamer's Twitter profile.

There were five streamers included in the full exposure category, UmiNoKaiju, Reversal, CriticalBard, Deere, and theGrefg. Reversal and theGrefg were the only two who were not openly harassed for being selected as POTD, though Reversal's version of the emote was critiqued heavily for not looking enough like the original Gooteks variant. However, the other

three streamers all faced gendered, racial, and homophobic harassment during their tenure as POTD.

Full exposure & Umino's gendered harassment

UmiNoKaiju is a female Twitch streamer with more than 76K followers on Twitch and 19.6K followers on Twitter. While she is a member of Twitch's Partner program and eligible for monetization offerings, she is unverified on Twitter, signaling her aspirational status. While technically the first POTD was Brazilian streamer Unrooolie, Twitch didn't promote him the same way they did for all five of the full exposure POTD streamers. However, UmiNoKaiju was the first POTD to be fully promoted by Twitch. She received significant support from her followers and fans, but there were multiple misogynistic and sexist comments directed toward the female streamer, including people using her POTD emote as part of a broader campaign of sexual harassment (Figure 20, below).

Figure 20

UminoKaiju is sexually harassed by hostiles in her tweet about being POTD.

Based on the current data set, it is impossible to confirm how many hostile or harassment comments UminoKaiju received in comparison to supportive comments; however the goal of this case study is to identify specific hurdles and barriers that marginalized creators communities must overcome to professionalize their creative output. Therefore it is telling that much of the harassment that she received was directed at her gender, reaffirming what many feminist scholars have already written about women facing sexual harassment in the workplace (Marwick, 2018; Nakamura, 2007). Twitch's silence in the face of UminoKaiju's public sexual harassment on her channel as well as her Twitter account, foreshadowing their tepid tolerance of misogyny that avoids creating negative publicity which threatens potential advertisers. behavior throughout the POTD campaign. In this capacity Twitch's silence reflects some of the limitations that women experience in their complementary labor, because the company they work for never publicly supported or apologized to the women who were sexually harassed.

Full exposure & CB's racial harassment

Twitch picked Omega "Critical Bard" Jones (17.9K Twitch followers, 52.4K Twitter followers) as POTD January 11th and included a link to his Twitter profile, after which he was quickly targeted with torrential harassment throughout the day. Jones is a black and gay content creator in the tabletop gaming community who co-hosts and acts in the popular *Dungeons & Dragons* program "Critical Role!" (Jones, n.d. "Critical Bard"). Initially, Jones was elated to have been chosen as POTD. Figures 21 and 22 depict Jones' excitement about being chosen as POTD and unfettered joy at the news. It is important to note that this joy occurred first thing in the morning and that Jones' tweets would continue to deflate and be ground down as the targeted harassment continued against him.

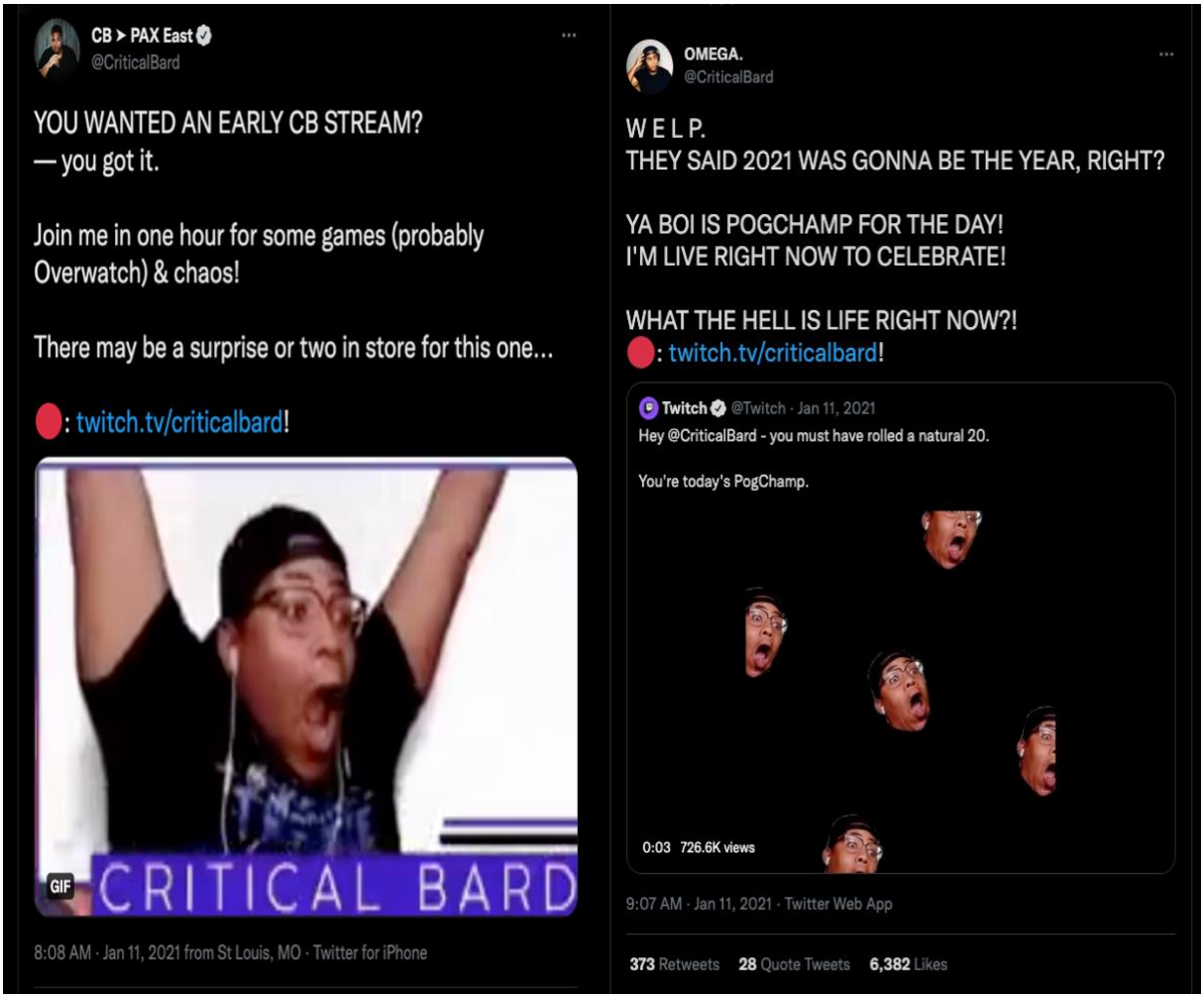

Figure 21 (left)

Jones tweets at 8:08 that there was a surprise for his viewers, indicating his knowledge and excitement at being chosen.

Figure 22 (right)

Jones tweets his excitement at 9:07 AM in all caps, suggesting this is a year-defining moment for his career.

Jones' harassment outlines multiple barriers that black and queer creators must overcome in their attempts to professionalize their careers. In addition to the obvious homophobic and

racist vitriol in the comments themselves, it is worth noting how Jones' commitment to and defense of Black Lives Matter in the midst of these targeted attacks caused additional outrage from hordes of anonymous internet users. Similarly, Jones plainly discusses a number of security measures that he put into place to combat his mistreatment. The ongoing harassment against Jones was not just limited to his Twitch stream though, but spilled onto Twitter as well as his Facebook account as malevolent internet users attempted to hack into his profiles to wreak havoc on his career across as many platforms as possible. Finally, in the aftermath of his harassment Jones petitioned both his followers and Twitter to verify his account to better protect himself. Each of these findings are valuable strategies that Jones used against his attackers, but also represent specific obstacles to professionalization that are frequently directed at Black creators.

Therefore, when anonymous people attempt to leverage platform features, like 'clipping,' and affordances, like sharing content across platforms simultaneously, they create additional barriers to a streamer's professionalization. In Figure 23 (below), Jones explains that "Some dudebros decided to clip a small part of my stream making it seem like I was being 'racist' towards white folk.'" Clipping refers to Twitch's feature that allows users to record and share roughly 90-120 seconds worth of video from a streamer's broadcast. The practice that Jones is describing here is when hostile users weaponize the feature to manufacture evidence that Jones hates white people. When Jones explains that he would defend BLM while rebuking White Lives Matter whether he was a Twitch Partner or not, it reveals that clipping here is a strategy used to threaten Jones' career as if the hostile viewers were trying to complain to a store manager about a problematic employee.

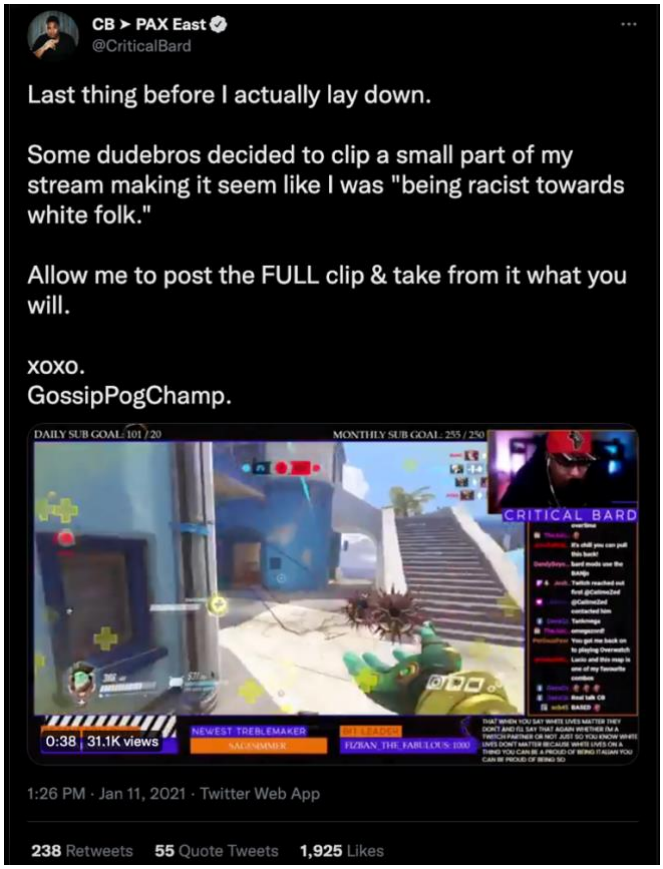

Figure 23

Jones describes ‘clipping’ as a strategy used to attack streamers and threaten their livelihood. The transcript from this video is listed below:

> When you say white lives matter they don't. And ill say that again whether I’m a Twitch partner or not. They know. White lives don't matter because white lives are not a thing. You can be proud of being Italian, you can be proud of being Scottish, you cannot be proud of being white. It’s not a thing. On the flip side, Black folks have to say Black Lives Matter because we were stolen from a country that we loved and were forced to be here, stripped of our heritages and our identities and all we know is our Blackness. There’s a difference, between saying black lives matter and white lives matter. I will say that again, there’s a difference between black lives matter and white lives matter. And if you don’t like that, again, you don't have to be here and I'm still going to be your PogChamp.”

The transcript confirms that much of Jones' continued harassment was directly related to his willingness to reject the 'white lives matter' discourse in his livestreamed workplace. It is useful and provoking to compare this incident to the recent 'Karen' phenomenon in which angry white women verbally assault employees in their workplaces. As a platform, there is no general manager for these anonymous users to complain to, but the behavior is essentially a platformed equivalent. In terms of the relationship between the POTD streamer and Twitch, Twitch's Terms of Service agreement allows creators to defend BLM, but their failure to publicly defend Jones while he was POTD signals their tacit approval of the practice, meaning that aspirational creators from marginalized communities must create additional safety measures to overcome the barrier that Twitch's tacit approval of racism.

Finally, Jones outlines multiple strategies for defending himself as a Black content creator on Twitch. He describes methods for limiting Chat's ability to communicate with him by enacting "follower-only mode" that only allows people who follow Jones' channel to participate in his chatroom. Similarly, enacting "emote-only mode" limits Chatters to communicating only in graphic emotes. Jones describes making his Twitter profile private so that only accounts that Jones follows can reply to his Tweets. While all of these strategies are useful for personal protection, they significantly reduce the creators' visibility and limit their accessibility, both of which are antithetical to the social media entertainment industry.

Full Exposure and DearDeere's Homophobic Harassment

DearDEERE (Deere) was the fourth POTD streamer on January 12th, 2021. Deere is openly gay and streams as a drag queen, but they have not revealed their identity in an attempt to protect themselves from harassment (Rosenblatt, 2019). Unfortunately, her inclusion in the POTD promotion attracted homophobic harassment. As someone with 52.3K followers on Twitch and 15.4K followers on Twitter, Deere qualifies as a professional aspirational streamer in

that they have successfully monetized their creative output but have not yet reached the rank of vocational ‘influencer’. This is significant for understanding how being included in the POTD event is an invaluable opportunity for professional aspirational streamers to advance their careers while simultaneously normalizing their visibility on Twitch.

Figure 24

Deere intentionally downplays her harassment and advocates for normalizing queer experiences.

While Deere was subjected to targeted and homophobic vitriol in retaliation for representing the emote, the streamer clarified that the harassment she received was much less severe than that directed at Jones the day before. She also described her consciously optimistic outlook about harassment, “Oh Id also like to add a bit more specifically that despite Im trying to be positive about everything, the treatment @CritialBard received yesterday was vile and worse than I received. I hope what we all witnessed is addressed & again, sets the blueprint for positive change” (Figure 24 above; Deere, 2021, “I’m trying to be positive”). Deere’s comments suggest that a determined optimism can act as a barrier to professionalization. Additionally, Deere’s use of ‘blueprint’ is significant because it signals her readiness to use her experience as an

educational moment for the company, which should be understood as an attempt to complement Twitch's platform logics by fostering a more inclusive and equitable community. However, the fact that a streamer has to conceive of their harassment as a learning opportunity is a significant limitation to their ability to conduct complementary labor.

Finally, in the same Twitter thread, Deere revealed that Twitch attempted to offer support during her stream while she was POTD, "...regarding which steps @Twitch took to assist me: offered to provide moderators in order to protect my channel and presence on the platform today & I politely declined. I have faith in my mods to protect my community but I appreciated the offer" (Figure 25, below; Deere, 2021, "I'm trying to be positive"). The fact that Twitch attempted to assist further reiterates that the employees working at Twitch may want to do the right thing, but that their solutions are not always the most viable. While offering to provide moderators is a genuine first step, it mistakenly assumes that the streamer doesn't have mods of their own, as well as that the streamers should automatically trust Twitch's provided moderators.

Figure 25

Deere mentions that she knew she'd be harassed for participating in POTD and that Twitch attempted to help her, but that she rejected the offer and relied on her own mods.

Deere has more than 52K Twitch followers and streams in drag, meaning that she has already done the labor of training moderators to reduce her harassment while becoming a Twitch Partner. Twitch's offer to provide moderators then ignores the reality that Deere must have mastered these skillsets to reach this point in her career. Furthermore, her existing moderators likely understand and can better manage Deere's norms and standards better than outsiders. Twitch's offer to provide moderators mistakes the source of the problem; it isn't that Deere doesn't know to employ mods, but the fact that Twitch has not invested enough resources into ending targeted harassment on their platform. This problem is exemplified further when the harassment is a direct result of the streamer's participation in Twitch's official POTD event.

The full exposure strategy is significant because it was the most publicly accessible relationship between Twitch and their POTD streamers. Twitch tagged the POTD streamers on their Twitter accounts accompanied with promotional graphics and short videos, demonstrating the livestreaming platform's intentions of using the event to boost the streamer's visibility to new audiences. This strategy assumes that audiences will not abuse identifying features, like tagging and direct linking, and ignores how they can afford opportunities for targeted network harassment (Marwick, 2021). Therefore, what should have been an opportunity for Twitch to stand by and celebrate their POTD creators quickly disintegrated as the platform remained silent while streamers like CriticalBard, Deere, and UmiNoKaiju were attacked.

This strategy applies to the POTD streamers from January 9th through the 13th, with intense public harassment occurring on the 9th, 11th, and 12th. Eventually, Twitch acknowledged the attacks that their POTD streamers were facing with a series of Tweets at 6:57 PM on January 12th. The timing is significant because it shows that the company took longer to

defend their streamers than they did in planning the entire POTD series in the first place. However, Twitch eventually issued the statement that:

> Twitch is home to creators and fans of all backgrounds, which we're excited to highlight through our daily PogChamps. We believe in celebrating the diversity of our communities because we want Twitch to be a welcoming place for everyone to connect and create together. Hateful conduct and harassment stand in the way of that ideal, and they have no place on Twitch, social media, or anywhere else. We'll continue to take action against those who violate our community guidelines and seek to harm our community and creators. The updates we made to our Hateful Conduct and Harassment Policies are in service of that ideal of making Twitch a safe place for everyone to create. Join our January 21 Creator Camp to learn more and ask questions about the upcoming changes (Figure 26, below; "Twitch is home to creators", 2021)

Figure 26

Twitch makes a statement about the targeted harassment in their POTD event.

Rather than following the example of non-profit groups like AnyKey who have been developing resources about fostering inclusive communities on Twitch since as early as 2015 (AnyKey, “Resources”, n.d.), Twitch attempted to solve this issue by changing their governance policies. These tweets make a general appeal to the Twitch community with vague platitudes about hate having no place on their platform, but the company fails to publicly name, let alone apologize to, the streamers who were harassed during their participation in POTD. Further, by limiting their governance only to behaviors that violate their hateful conduct and harassment policies, Twitch tacitly allows the practice to continue if the users are willing to abstain from the most obvious and explicit slurs.

It is telling that Twitch was originally willing to tag and identify their creators, but when this attention became newsworthy controversy Twitch acted in a way that protected their “community” *before* their “creators” (“Twitch is home to creators”, 2021). In terms of an employer-employee relationship, this means that Twitch acted to protect their brand-friendliness before their streamers. The POTD promotion serves as a professionalizing milestone for streamers because Twitch vouched for their credibility to Twitch’s global audience, so the platform’s statement here and subsequent decision to continue the promotion with less visibility demonstrate that in moments of crisis the platform will defend themselves first.

Half Exposure (Jan 14- 17)

The half exposure strategy lasted from January 14 - 17, in which Twitch named the POTD streamer and included a short promotional video in their Tweets but did not directly link to the streamer’s social media or Twitch profiles. This strategy allows Twitch to promote and celebrate the streamer while appearing to create roadblocks for those attempting harassing the POTD. While this initially seems as a compromise to protect streamers from harassment, it failed

to do so while making it more difficult for potential viewers to find the POTD's content. The social media entertainment industry is funded primarily through ad revenue, so if Twitch decides to remove any direct links to their POTD's channels it reduces the streamer's exposure to potential audience members and new revenue streams. This strategy, especially its proximity to the controversial full exposure strategy, reveals Twitch's inability (or unwillingness) to publicly defend their streamers from targeted harassment as it occurs.

Twitch's decision to identify the POTD streamer without any direct links to their channel allowed the promotion to continue without as much controversy as those from the previous week. This presents a complicated relationship for Twitch and its streamers because the company's long term success depends on their ability to promote streamers to new audiences outside of its core gaming niche. Therefore, the half exposure strategy should be understood as Twitch's inherent failure to consider how to safely promote their POTD streamers. However, POTD streamers are not helpless and have actively taken steps to protect themselves and to take advantage of the exposure to new audiences that POTD offers despite the harassment that accompanies it. This is seen most clearly through ThatBronzeGirl's forceful self-promotion during her tenure to raise awareness and charitable donations for Punjabi farmers in India.

Identity as Strategic Resistance

Jasmine 'ThatBronzeGirl' Bhullar is a female streamer who describes herself as "Punjabi AF" (Bhullar [@ThatBronzeGirl], n.d.). While she streams on Twitch full time, she has a successful career writing, producing, and acting in various *Dungeons & Dragons* content as well as on the internet gaming channel "Geek and Sundry" (Bhullar, "IMDb", n.d.), highlighting her aspirational trajectory to become a vocational influencer. Bhullar is a Twitch Partner with 89.9K followers and has 36.2K Twitter followers, demonstrating that she is a professional content creator who monetizes her content, but has not yet reached the vocational-influencer level of

fame. As a female who identifies as Punjabi, Bhullar diversifies the representation of POTD streamers. Twitch failed to publicly defend Bhullar even though she, along with *all* of the marginalized POTD streamers, grew the platform by constructing and facilitating communities outside of Twitch's primary demographics in esports and AAA games.

Figure 27

Bhullar playing Punjabi MC music as a strategy to promote her identity in response to bigoted trolls who are harassing her.

At 9:12 AM on the 17th, Bhullar retweeted Twitch's initial announcement that she was POTD with a short video of her screaming along with the message "If you don't like it cry about it" (Bhullar, 2021 January 17) as a confident declaration of her achievement. The phrasing implies that Bhullar was anticipating backlash from the same people claiming that the original PogChamp emote was better. Roughly two hours later at 11:36 AM, Bhullar tweets "People are shouting at me over a free emote on Twitch and I'm just over here with the squad raising money for charity and being Punjabi AF" with a video of her dancing in her chair to the popular musician Punjabi MC while she plays games on her livestream (Bhullar, 2021b, "People are

shouting at me; Figure 27, above). This explains that the targeted harassment against POTD occurs swiftly whether Twitch provides direct links to the streamer's channel or not, but more importantly, exemplifies how marginalized POTD streamers like Bhullar take pride in their identities to overcome targeted harassment.

Figure 28

Jessica 'ThatBronzeGirl' Bhullar announcing a fundraiser for Khalsa Aid.

The harassment that Bhullar received is anything but novel, but what is interesting is how she leveraged that attention toward charitable donations. Bhullar launched a weekend-long fundraiser for the Farmer's Protest in Delhi on January 16 (Figure 28, above), before she was announced as the POTD on the 17th. As a professional aspirational streamer, Bhullar's decision to raise money and awareness for Punjabi Farmer's Unions in Delhi protesting for controlled pricing on crops exemplifies how streamers from marginalized backgrounds use Twitch's platform to create awareness, educate, and raise money for causes outside the purview of Twitch's core demographics. Whether or not she planned the fundraiser to coincide with her

POTD is irrelevant because the targeted harassment that Bhullar faced on the 17th could have caused the fundraiser to fail.

While drawing attention to and raising money for the Farmer's Protest in India is one way that Bhullar leveraged her Punjabi identity against gendered and xenophobic vitriol, she also labeled herself as Punjabi, shared images of a popular Indian videogame characters, and shared clips with music from Punjabi MC playing in the background. Thematic analysis revealed that all of these are parts of a greater strategy that forcibly creates a space for representing various Punjabi communities which can then repel attempted harassment. Figure 29 (below) includes an example of Bhullar using her Punjabi identity as a strategy for resisting vitriol.

Figure 29

Bhullar tweets a gif of the Indian *Streetfighter* character, Dhalsim, when discussing her mistreatment with her supporters.

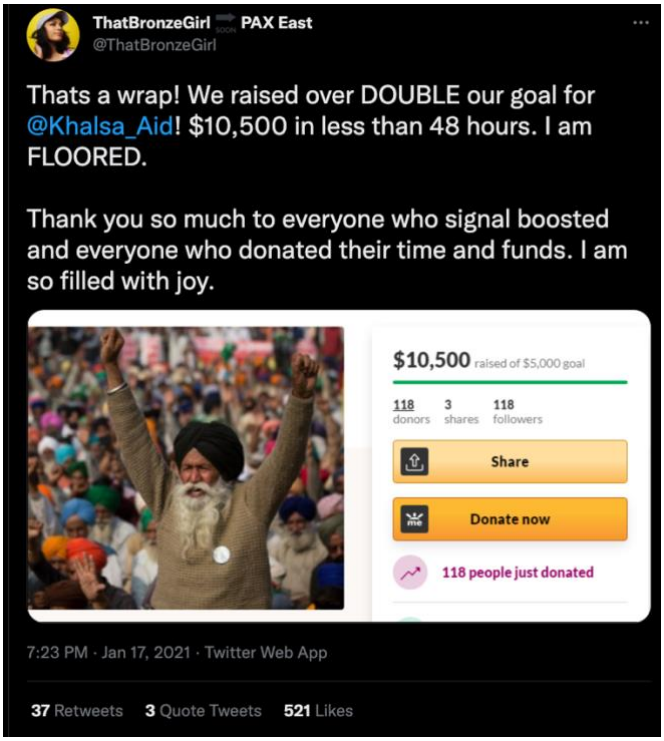

Figure 30

Bhullar celebrates raising more than $10,000 for charity in under 48 hours.

Though her tweet never mentions her ethnicity directly, it is significant that she included a gif of the popular Indian *Street Fighter* character Dhalsim when recounting the attacks against her character. Bhullar was chosen as POTD on January 17, meaning that some time had passed since Twitch had condemned "hateful conduct" on January 12 after Jones' mistreatment. Twitch's statement effectively limited the language that hostile users could use when harassing POTD streamers since blatant attacks on their sexuality, gender, race, and ethnicities were now formally prohibited by the platform's Terms of Service agreement (see Figure 26, above). This, along with Marwick's targeted harassment (2021) explain how seemingly pedantic criticisms about a streamer's facial expression not matching Gootek's original are less about the accuracy of their version of the PogChamp emote and more about labeling Bhullar and her community as outsiders who violate Twitch's norms. Therefore, when Bhullar tweets Indian and Punjabi

popular culture references, like using Punjabi MC songs to fight back against harassers (Figure 27**)** and the character Dhalsim (Figure 29), these are cultural symbols that remind Bhullar's fans and critics of Punjabi's growing popularity in Western popular culture mainstream.

Bhullar's experience during her POTD tenure can accurately be described as targeted network harassment (Marwick, 2021), focusing on the vocal and hateful minority draws attention away from Bhullar's continued success as a streamer and content creator. She has roughly 126K followers across Twitch and Twitter which is comparatively lower to vocational-influencers with millions of followers, regardless of this disparity Bhullar's community successfully raised more than $10,000 in less than two days (Figure 30, above). The fact that they achieved this while actively being harassed is even more impressive, but exemplifies how marginalized streamers leverage their popularity to provide material improvements for their off-platform or 'In Real Life' communities.

In terms of a relationship with Twitch, their decision to remain silent during Bhullar's mistreatment effectively barred them from commenting on her successful fundraiser, meaning that Bhullar's success was *in spite* of Twitch's silence rather than *through* their public support. If the platform had publicly defended her from the beginning, they could have potentially fostered goodwill amongst a new audience demographic that is outside their primary demographics. This shows that half exposure creates additional barriers for marginalized POTD streamers to overcome, but also that remaining silent about POTD harassment prevents Twitch from participating in their streamer's achievements.

<u>Zero Exposure (Jan 18- Feb 11)</u>

Twitch's final strategy for promoting POTD streamers was labeled 'zero exposure' because during that time the company no longer explained who the POTD streamer was. On the

18th, Twitch tweeted a short video with the message “Every day’s a brand new chance to pog. Check Chat to see the daily PogChamps throughout the week” (Figure 31, below; Twitch, 2021 January 18 “Every day’s a new chance”). The tweet included a ten second video that quickly flashed images of some of the previous POTD streamers. This was the final tweet that Twitch made about the POTD event until they announced the conclusionary ‘PogChampening’ event. Twitch’s zero-exposure strategy lasted for 25 days from January 18th through February 11th, meaning that this was the most common strategy for promoting POTD streamers. Comparatively, the half-exposure strategy lasted four days, and the full-exposure strategy lasted five days.

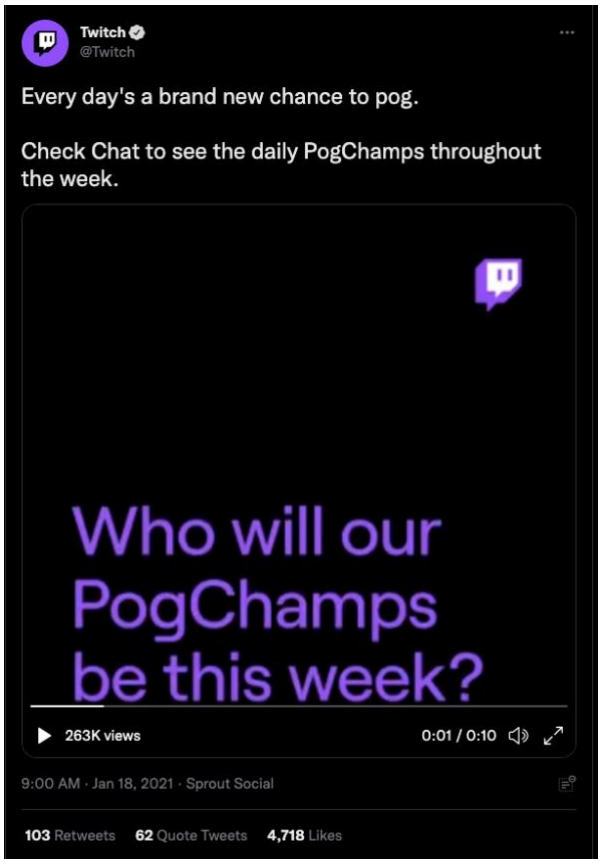

Figure 31

Twitch’s final promotional message that publicly confirms who the POTD is.

As a representation of Twitch's workplace relationships with POTD streamers, the zero-exposure strategy reinforces the company's tendency to avoid publicly naming, defending, or supporting marginalized streamers who are targeted during official company promotions. That is problematic in and of itself, but once again, focusing purely on Twitch's power to dictate terms of visibility for their POTD streamers loses sight of their agency as well as the creative tactics to celebrate their achievements safely. The majority of the POTD streamers from marginalized backgrounds in this period rallied their fans and fellow streamers to post their support on Twitter and Twitch, discussed chatroom settings like follower-only and emote-only to contain how the vitriol could be expressed, and more.

This is an effective tactic for streamers experiencing targeted harassment, but they tend to combat hate by limiting hostile users' access to the streamer. These solutions frequently mean enabling the most stringent privacy settings available on the platform, meaning that they offer a superficial perspective on the relationship between the POTD streamers and Twitch, especially because they are similar to the strategies were similar to those deployed by POTD streamers from the full- and half-exposure periods. That being said, the streamer Kahlief Adams' decision to create a personal website outside of Twitch and other social media entertainment platforms that was entirely dedicated to his day as PogChamp is perhaps the illuminating example from this period for underscoring the professional relationship between Twitch and their streamers during a company event.

Kahlief Adams' strategic self-promotion and identity as resistance

Kahlief Adams is a Black content creator and Twitch streamer who originally developed the *Spawn on Me* podcast, which describes itself as "the internet's definitive video game podcast featuring and spotlighting gamers of color" (Adams, K. [host], n.d.). Adams has 9.4K followers on Twitch where he streams under the SpawnOnMe moniker and his personal Twitter profile has

23.2K followers on Twitter. All together, these multiple creative ventures and channels signify Adams' status as a professional aspirational creator who'd greatly benefit from the exposure that representing the PogChamp emote would bring. Therefore, Twitch's silence counters the pervasive logics of visibility that dominate social media entertainment and outsources the labor of self-promotion and combating targeted harassment to the victims.

By failing to announce that Adams was the POTD, Twitch effectively communicated to its users that the POTD streamers were responsible for keeping themselves safe. It's noteworthy then that Adams' emote was an animated graphic rather than a photo of his actual face because whether he anticipated backlash or not, it helps to place some distance between the streamer and the hostile users. Similarly, Adams maintains two Twitter accounts (@SpawnOnMe as well as @KahliefAdams) and livestreams on Twitch using the @SpawnOnMe brand, which connects more obviously with his podcast than with himself. These strategic decisions limit the audiences' direct access to Adams which facilitated his efforts to market himself when Twitch was silent.

Distancing strategies are useful tools that streamers can use to combat online harassment, but Adams created an entire educational website, "IAmPogChamp.com", that he linked to in his celebratory tweets. Adams' decision to exert the effort and resources to produce this website before he was selected as POTD suggests that POTD streamers were dissatisfied with Twitch's response to the targeted backlash. When clicked, the user is greeted with an enormous version of his emote with the wry message "YOU'LL ALL BE OK, IT'S ONLY FOR 24 HOURS #SUPPORTBLACKSTREAMERS" (Adams, n.d. "IAmPogChamp; Figure 32, below). The website offers three tongue-in-cheek pages, "Hi" that includes biographical information about Adams' life, "If You're Upset" for hostile users who would likely attempt to harass Adams, as well as "Here is How You Can Help", all of which include links to Adams' profiles and

podcasts. Despite the fact that Adams' website is a creative strategy to recognize his achievement of being selected as POTD, it is critical to clearly state that the fact that Adams even had to create an educational-promotional website in the first place further outlines how commonplace these issues are for marginalized creators.

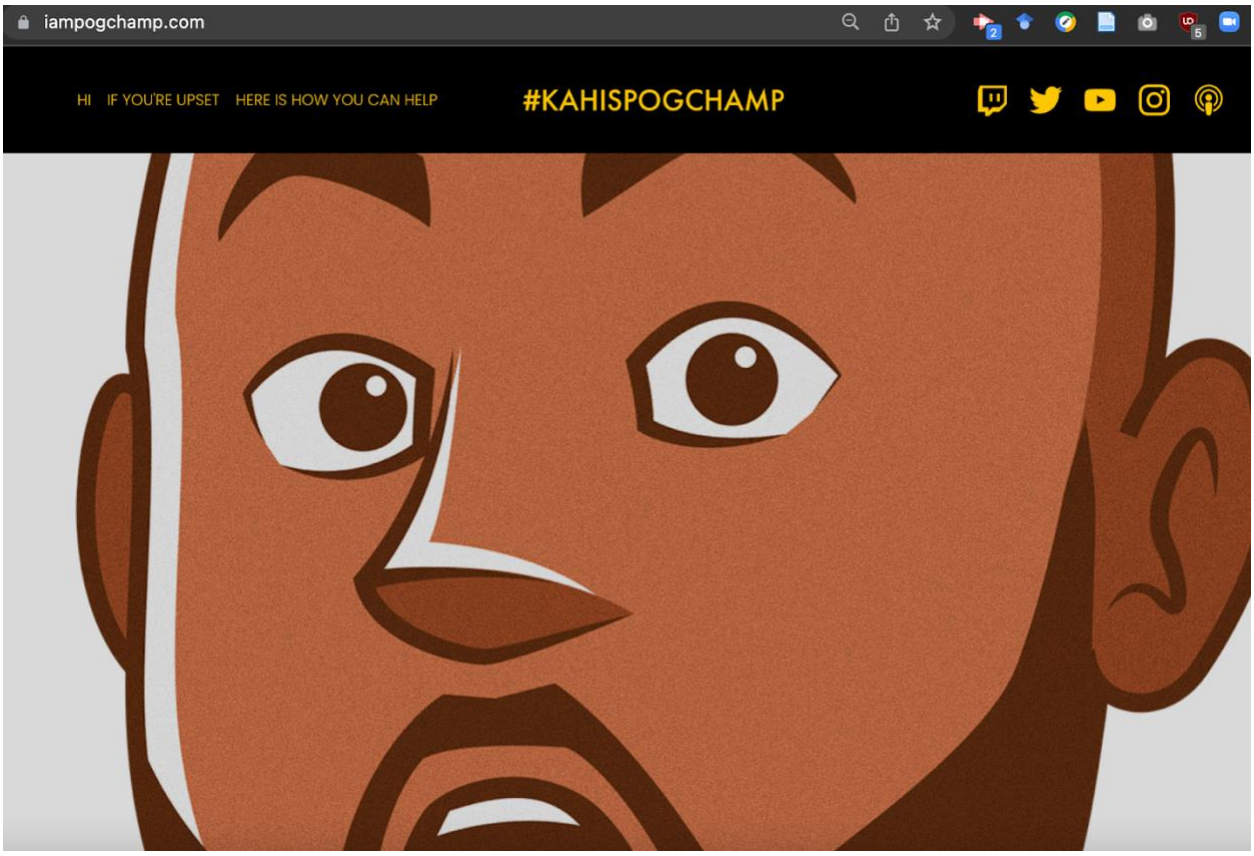

Figure 32

Adams' website *IAmPogChamp* is a strategic effort to fend off harassment.

The website serves multiple purposes, but in terms of a workplace relationship between Twitch and POTD streamers, it demonstrates Twitch's failure to provide educational and training resources for all of its community, *especially* for the viewers who continue to be the largest contributors to the POTD hate campaigns. This failure to invest educational resources can also be interpreted as one of the limitations to complementing labor as not every streamer is willing to

take on this additional educational responsibility on top of their routine labor to produce the stream and entertain audiences. In this capacity, Adams' website offers another example of how marginalized creators are expected to perform additional educational and productive labor to combat hate on Twitch. When Twitch failed to publicly endorse Adams as the POTD, it created a vacuum for their most horrible users to spew hurtful rhetoric, but also outsources the onus of educational and productive labor to creators who seek to normalize the professionalization of marginalized POTD.

Adams juxta positioned quotes from Muhammad Ali, songs from rapper Oddissee, and books from James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, as well as Michelle Alexander on his website. While these are only a handful of examples of the contributions that Black Americans have made to popular culture, Adams decision to display them on his website dedicated to fending off anticipated harassment is telling. By positioning all of these resources under the heading "If You're Upset", Adams reiterates his undermining point that online hate can be solved through education. The "If You're Upset" page presents an interesting idea that the focused and coordinated hate actually helps marginalized streamers grow their audience that will be discussed further in the conclusion of this chapter, but first I want to summarize Twitch's "PogChampening" event that ended the POTD promotion by having Twitch users vote on a final POTD replacement.

The PogChampening

On February 11, Twitch tweeted the following message (Figure 33, below), "After 35 PogChamps in 35 days, The PogChampening is upon us. You decide what the future of hype looks like. Tune in and vote live, February 12 at 12pm PT on twitch.tv/twitch". They included a video explaining a vote to determine a final winner and that the emote had been shared (or

spammed) more than 62 million times in the 35 day event, demonstrating the emote's popularity and cultural relevance on Twitch. Even though Twitch made no direct reference to the ongoing harassment that plagued their initial POTD event, many streamers and fans from the Twitch community complained that the proposed election would likely be reduced to a popularity contest that would effectively bar marginalized streamers from enjoying the recognition and legitimization associated with representing a global emote, even if just for one day.

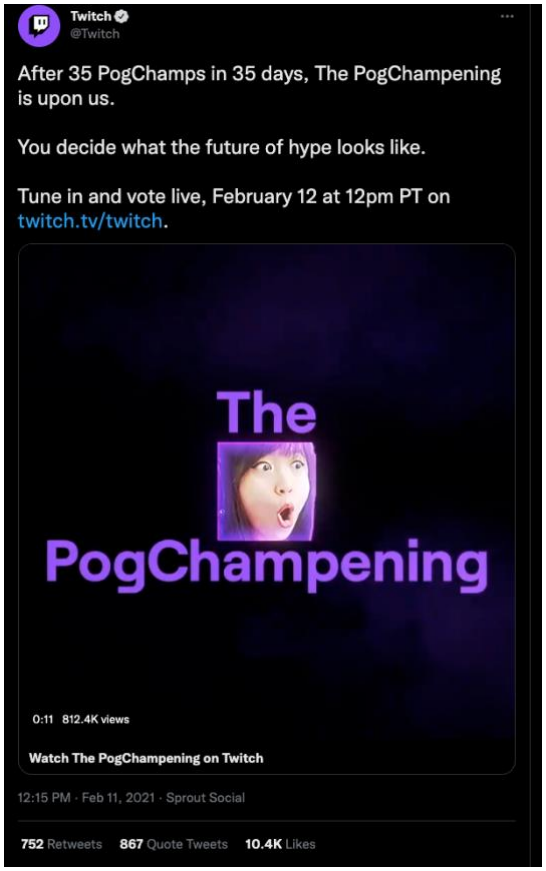

Figure 33

Twitch announces The PogChampening election to determine a final replacement for the emote.

While the bulk of this analysis is limited to POTD discourse on Twitter, it is important to briefly summarize the hour-long event to understand the conclusion of this controversial

promotion (Figure 33, above). Despite contestations, Twitch organized and promoted an election for either UminoKaiju or KomodoHype as the new permanent version of the emote. This election was held on Twitch's official channel and viewers were prompted to vote in a pop-up web extension that submitted your vote to Twitch officials. Figure 34 (below) shows that the event was hosted by: Marcus Graham, who described himself as a Twitch veteran with 10 years at the company, as well as the head of Creator Development, Erin Wayne, a member of the Community, Creator, & Influencer Marketing teams, as well was Ray A, a Community Marketing specialist involved with the educational Creator Camp series.

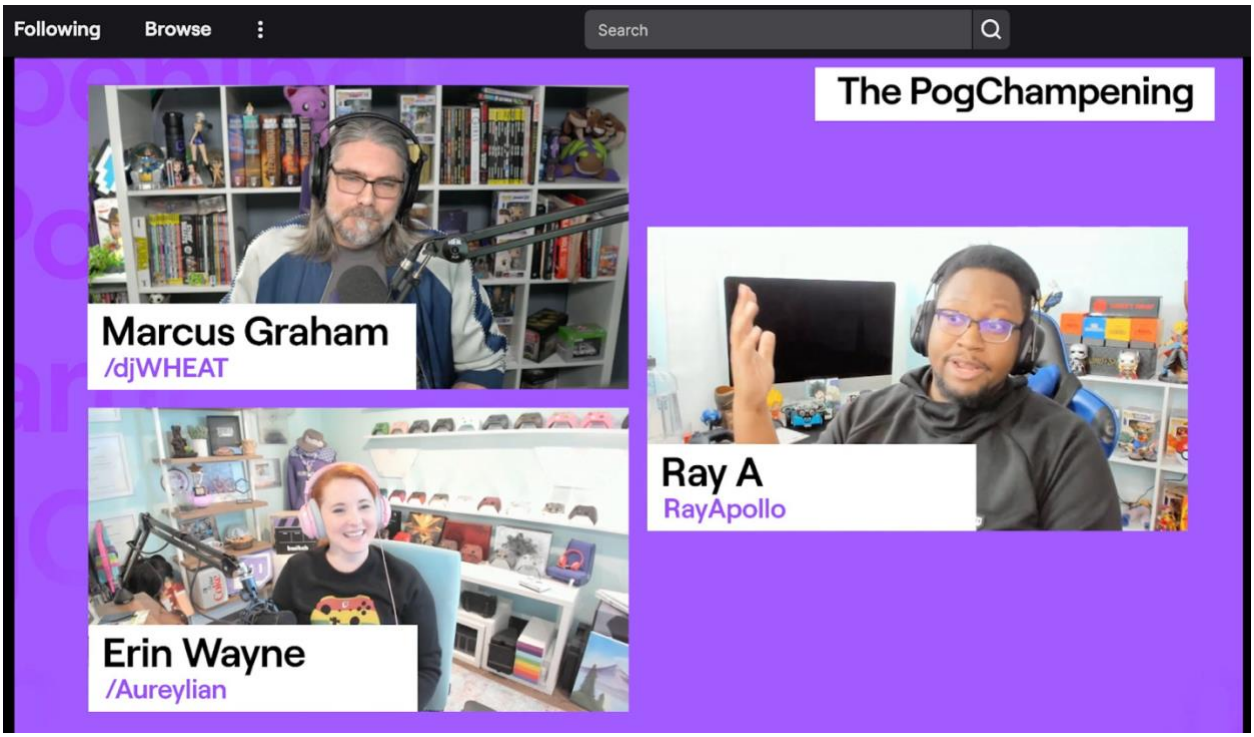

Figure 34

Twitch employees, Marcus Graham, Erin Wayne, & Ray A hosting The PogChampening event on February 12, 2021.

The three employees offer a number of explanations for terminating the POTD event, including that creating daily POTDs was an unsustainable effort for Twitch employees managing

the campaign, and that it was not generating meaningful growth or visibility opportunities for the POTD streamers. During the livestream, Wayne explained that roughly 20 Twitch employees were in charge of coordinating with the creator, receiving their submitted emote, reviewing and editing the emote, as well as arranging contracts with creators, though she made no mention if they were monetarily compensated or not. Similarly, the employees reiterated that the promotion was not successful in terms of inciting growth and visibility and that the resources allocated to POTD could be better used in other Twitch events meant to promote aspirational streamers, like the Twitch Ambassador program. This reasoning reiterates Twitch's commitment to its growth and ad revenue platform logics, but also reveals another limitation to a streamer's ability to perform complementary labor. The employees' justification for canceling the POTD promotion never considered how Twitch made significant attempts to reduce the visibility of the campaign. Therefore, Twitch's silence in the face of harassment is a limitation to complementing labor because it creates disconnect between the employees that manage Twitch and the streamers who use it professionally.

Eventually, the three Twitch employees announced that viewers could vote between either UminoKaiju or Komodohype as the final replacement for the beloved PogChamp emote. Graham explained that these two were selected because the UminoKaiju PogChamp variant was used more than 4 million times by more than 500,000 unique chatters, whereas KomodoHype was selected because of the emote's historical significance to the Twitch community. This rationale is just one example of how Twitch employees allow the most popular and engaging content to dictate how they govern their platform. For example, Graham's comments about Umino's emote being used by more than 500,000 unique chatters speaks to the growing popularity of the platform, but fails to account for how targeted harassment may contribute to, or

artificially inflate, those metrics. In fact, the entire hour-long broadcast made no references to, or apologies for, the targeted harassment campaigns directed at many of the POTD streamers.

Finally, at the end of the broadcast, Graham announced that Komodohype was the official winner and the new permanent PogChamp emote. This event was described as an election that would give power to the Twitch community and all three Twitch employees hosting the event explained how the streaming platform frequently integrated official emotes that were popular amongst the community. However, between offering only 2 possible choices out of 35 total options and failing to display the results of the election, it is impossible to verify if this was an accurate election or an example of platform governance in which Twitch ended their promotional campaign to avoid further controversy. This demonstrates how Twitch maintains absolute authority over their service and that as platformization draws increasingly 'serious' forms of cultural production, like journalism or political commentary, onto their service, Twitch will continue to have the power to reduce the visibility of streamers who attract negative attention that could threaten sponsors.

Discussion

The POTD campaign is just one example of how Twitch and other platforms in the social media entertainment industry can inadvertently create barriers for marginalized content creators seeking opportunities to perform complementary labor. Twitch's ambivalence toward hate raids (Chalk, 2022; Horetski, 2022) is concerning because it continues to put undue risk on professional aspirational streamers from marginalized backgrounds. This campaign ultimately highlights how Twitch acts as an extension of the gaming community, an online community, as well as a formal workplace, all of which complicates traditional understandings of harassment. It is important to reiterate that this incident confirms Twitch's ability to negotiate the terms in

which streamers participate in their official promotional events that increase a streamer's ability to do complementary labor that attracts new users and sponsors to the platform. This is particularly concerning as platformization continues to drive more 'serious' forms of cultural production onto Twitch's service. However, focusing only on Twitch's decision to limit the POTD streamer's access to complementary opportunities prevents meaningful discussions of streamer agency and the innovative strategies that marginalized POTD streamers implemented to combat their mistreatment, which become meaningful forms of resistance amidst platformization.

The innovative strategies that POTD streamers deployed against their targeted harassment highlight their agency within the social media entertainment industry. In an ideal world where Twitch had promoted, and then supported, their POTD streamers, that exposure and amplification would be incredibly valuable to professional aspirational streamers. In reality, Twitch abandoned publicizing the promotion after just ten days with no public apology, likely to avoid causing additional controversy. This reality in which platforms equate identity-based harassment with controversy has led many professional aspirational streamers to take it upon themselves to self-promote and combat racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and misogyny. Scholarship about the mistreatment of marginalized bodies and communities has already laid the foundation for understanding these specific barriers across all aspects of life (Ruberg, 2019, 2021; Florini, 2019; Consalvo, 2012, 2018), but studying how these hurdles are constructed, and navigated, on Twitch extends these findings into the platformed social media entertainment industry.

POTD streamers demonstrate their agency by forcibly creating opportunities for themselves on Twitch, namely through strategies like 'identity as resistance' and 'education'.

Thematic analysis revealed that ‘identity as resistance’ was a common strategy that marginalized POTD streamers used against their assailants. Identity as resistance refers to whenever a streamer leveraged cultural references, texts, or media as a tacit reminder that a streamer’s culture belongs on Twitch. While many of the POTD streamers strategically evoked their marginalized identities to forcibly create representation on Twitch, Bhullar’s ability to combine all of these cultural references and texts into applied action by raising more than $10,000 for the Farmer’s Protest is perhaps the most pertinent example of how a POTD streamer performed complementary labor not for Twitch, but for the Punjabi community that she supported. This demonstrates that under platformization, even as Twitch supports streamers who complement the ad revenue and growth platform logics, streamers like Bhullar are able to resist this logic and repurpose them to create awareness and raise funds for communities off of Twitch.

The second thematic strategy for combating targeted hate on Twitch was ‘education’, which is highly related to, but importantly distinct from, the ‘identity as resistance’ strategy. Education describes whenever a POTD streamer provided external resources and materials for potential assailants, in an effort to correct their bigoted opinions through exposure to alternative cultures and perspectives. While ‘identity as resistance’ is a forceful declaration that the streamer, their identity, and their community are welcome on Twitch, ‘education’ is a less aggressive attempt to correct problematic assumptions and behaviors. One of the most compelling examples of the education was Kahlief Adams’ “IAmPogChamp” website that recommends music and literature as a way to combat bigoted prejudice.

Bhullar’s ‘identity as resistance’ and Adams’ ‘education’ strategies are both shining examples of the strategies that marginalized POTD streamers used to fight back against their harassers with admittedly different tactics. The education strategy seeks to build bridges and

foster mutual understanding through learning, the identity as resistance strategy sets those bridges on fire so that the streamer has space to foster their own communities. While it is important to understand these strategies serve specific purposes through varying means, they are not completely separate either and streamers frequently weave together combinations of both tactics.

These strategies offer varying tactics for resisting vitriol, but they functionally accomplish the same thing; converting online hate into lucrative opportunities for the streamer. When Omega 'CriticalBard' Jones was being targeted he enabled the 'Follower only' setting that allows only followers to participate in the Chatroom, meaning that would-be harassers would contribute to Jones' follower count if they wanted to spew hate. Similarly, both Bhullar's fundraising efforts and Adams' IAmPogChamp website demonstrate how standing up to anonymous haters online can cause controversial attention, which can be leveraged toward lucrative opportunities in the social media entertainment industry.

Even though these marginalized creators are successfully fighting to remain visible and grow their following, their monetary successes pale in comparison to the lucrative opportunities enjoyed by streamers from non-marginalized communities. While it is important to draw attention to the streamer's agency and highlight their ability to supplement their income through Twitch streaming, there is still much work to be done to create equitable professional development opportunities on Twitch. In terms of a professional relationship where Twitch acts as the owner and streamers act as employees, Twitch has a long way to go to educate their users and to foster a more inclusive working environment. Ultimately, these tensions between the platform and the POTD streamers combating harassment reveal how Twitch's platform acts as a

nexus that combines workplace harassment, gaming harassment, and online harassment into one platform.

CHAPTER 5

Platformization of Cultural Production on Twitch

Throughout my dissertation, I've demonstrated how the POCP presents opportunities for Twitch to arrange the livestreaming marketplace according to its own advertising revenue and growth logics by offering cultural producers systems to monetize their creative output. However, the possibility of monetization is not a guarantee because Twitch streamers must invest significant labor into cultivating an audience large enough to meet Twitch's standards for inclusion in the Partner program to even access all forms of monetization on the platform. To complicate things further, aspirational streamers must endure precarious and hyper competitive conditions to succeed as influencers, seen through the fact that of the 27,000 streamers in the Partner program, less than 100 of them earned $1 Million from August 2019 through October 2021 (Micelli, 2021). All of these factors pressure Partnered streamers to do complementary labor that attracts new users and sponsors to Twitch.

Recent research on digital platforms (Poell et al., 2022; van Dijck et al., 2018) as well as the social media entertainment industry (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; 2021) describes how quickly these formidable media industries have converged and evolved together. The topic of platform evolution has also been covered in Polity Press' series of monographs dedicated to singular platforms, such as Burgess and Green's *YouTube* (2018), Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin's *Instagram* (2020), as well as Murthy's *Twitter* (2018). This dissertation is intended as a first step toward producing a similar monograph on Twitch by pairing extant literature with analytical case studies that evaluate the conditions that framed a streamer's ability to perform complementary labor from 2014 – 2022. Examining these working conditions is important in and of itself, but these years also represent when Amazon acquired Twitch in 2014, which formalized the platform's ad revenue logics.

Twitch's marketplace allows streamers who have ascended to Partner status to monetize their content, of which generally takes half. However, this arrangement is likely to continue evolving because Twitch is solely responsible for managing these terms. This arrangement has been the bedrock that the Twitch streaming economy has been built on, but that could potentially change as early as the summer of 2022 (D'Anastasio, 2022; Colbert, 2022). On April 27, 2022, reporters explained that Twitch proposed increasing their share of a streamer's subscription revenue from 50 to 70% (D'Anastasio, 2022), as well as implementing additional status categories for streamers outside of Affiliate and Partners (Colbert, 2022). If, and when, Twitch implements these changes it will likely further solidify the existing meritocratic hierarchy that benefits streamers from non-marginalized backgrounds and communities. Documenting the policies that structure monetization on Twitch's marketplace proves that not all streamers are treated equally, or have access to the same opportunities. Therefore, the following paragraphs review how each chapter answers my dissertation's central research questions that are listed below.

RQ1 - How do influencers navigate the demands of the Twitch platform, sponsors and advertisers, and their communities?
RQ2 - How do successful influencers complement the platform logics of Twitch?

Chapter 1 describes a complicated dialectical relationship between people who use platforms to innovate new forms of cultural production and the corporations that control, organize, and profit from their production, ultimately establishing the conditions for influencers to monetize their content while performing complementary labor. However, if the contemporary social media entertainment industry is a convergence of the legacy cultural industries and the GAFAM technology start-ups (Cunningham & Craig, 2019) then it is crucial to consider how

Twitch reiterates both industry's issues with discriminatory and exclusionary practices toward their employees. Therefore, my interest is in understanding *when* and *how* these industrial biases negatively affect professional aspirational streamers' ability to participate in opportunities that would further their careers.

The introduction provides a discussion about digital labor, precarity, and social media influencers that serves as the basis for the first research question. Becoming an influencer on Twitch is incredibly difficult and requires multiple forms of labor. At minimum, streamers must conduct productional labor to create high-quality and entertaining broadcasts (Taylor, 2018). Streamers must also do relational labor (Baym, 2018) to forge emotional connections with their followers in a manner that audiences perceive as authentic (Banet-Weiser, 2012). When a streamer finally ascends to Partner status and is then eligible for all of Twitch's monetization tools, they are then expected to navigate relationships with the platform, potential sponsors, and fans on their own. Collectively all of these different forms of a streamer's labor act as complementary labor that attract new users and brands to Twitch. While Twitch presents its marketplace as an egalitarian meritocracy, the second chapter outlines platformization of cultural production (POCP) theory to explain how the company tends to promote streamers who do complementary labor more frequently than professional aspirational streamers with less followers.

While the first chapter explored digital labor and social media influencers who produce original content, the second chapter implements POCP theory to outline how Twitch's platform logics shape a streamer's cultural production. POCP investigates how a corporate platform's ability to govern itself allows it to leverage its assets to develop multi-sided markets that invite new cultural producers to interact with one another on its service. Twitch can modify the

policies, algorithms, and monetization offerings at any time, meaning that it has significant control over a streamer's cultural production. As platformization continues to draw new media formats and cultural performances onto proprietary platforms, these businesses assume even more power over how culture is produced online.

For example, Twitch recently renewed a contract with the NFL to broadcast Thursday night games (Ricker, 2021), whereas the company made a deal with Bandsintown during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to sign more musicians to its service. While both of these examples feature entertainment content, they still demonstrate that Twitch is aggressively expanding into new markets and forms of cultural production outside of games and esports. However, when Twitch expands into more 'serious' forms of cultural production like news (Foxman et al., under review), or political commentary (Harris et al., under review), the company extends its control over the creation and circulation of even more media content. Therefore, it is important to draw attention to the ways in which Twitch's policies affect a streamer's ability to monetize their creative output through complementary labor.

Chapter 3 explained how Betar's complementary behaviors resulted in material, cultural, and career benefits. Some of the material benefits were that FG sold more than 7 million copies in a month, whereas Betar accrued more than 233,000 new followers in the 11 days and 9 streams with a culmination of more than 347,000 concurrent viewers. Cultural benefits included fostering goodwill and respect from Betar's fellow streamers, as well as reinforcing his brand-friendly reputation. Betar's career benefitted from this behavior the most, seen through his multimillion dollar exclusive contract with YouTube Gaming in 2021 as well as his recent status as part-owner of the Dallas Cowboys' esports organization, Complexity Gaming. Obviously Betar was an influencer on Twitch before the FG meta, but the fact that Twitch participated

directly in the FG discourse is an important example of how the company behaves when targeted harassment is directed at influencers.

My first case study in Chapter 3 used inductive thematic analysis to examine the results of Betar's frictionless complementary labor that created monetary and social value for him, the Fall Guy's (FG) game, as well as Twitch. This specific complementary behavior requires Betar to be publicly accessible to brands and fans in ways that have historically attracted harassment for marginalized creators. I examine these specific barriers further in Chapter 4, but the fact that Betar is a white, cis-heterosexual man who brands himself as a nerd means that he is highly unlikely to be subjugated to hate raids on social media, meaning that he can enjoy this frenzied spectacle that culminated with nearly 1.3 Million unique viewers on Betar's stream. Because Betar was already an influencer with millions of followers on Twitch *before* the FG media frenzy, this case study demonstrates how Twitch and other sponsors collectively sanction influencers for frictionless entry into Twitch's advertising market. When Twitch, FG, and various brands participated in the jokes about Betar's ineptitude, they worked together without any tension to prevent them from generating hype and excitement that would draw new attention to Betar's obsessive FG gameplay. This synergy can be extremely lucrative, but as seen through the next case study, it rarely occurs for streamers who are victimized by targeted harassment.

My fourth chapter considers the limitations of complementary labor by examining the ways that Twitch promotes, or silences, streamers who are routinely harassed. This chapter's central argument is that Twitch's failure to anticipate hate raids against their most vulnerable streamers prevented them from reaping the full benefits of this opportunity. However, it is also about the ways these streamers resist and critique Twitch's safety-related shortcomings. When the platform repeatedly reduced its public support for POTD, streamers found ways to promote

and celebrate themselves. But it was often female, queer, or BIPOCC creators who implement strategies to protect themselves from harassment by reducing their visibility and exposure to new audiences, which challenge Twitch's ability to accrue more ad revenue.

These streamers tended to celebrate their identity and forcibly create enclaves for their communities and followers on Twitch, which further reaffirmed unique challenges and limitations that they face. Omega 'Critical Bard' Jones collaborated with other Black streamers and organizations and journalists to raise awareness about the POTD vitriol. Others, like Jasmine 'ThatBronzeGirl' Bhullar and Kahlief Adams of the "Spawn On Me" podcast found ways to incorporate their marginalized identities as sources of pride, joy, and affirmation. Bhullar shared images of popular video game characters like Dhalsim and songs from Punjabi MC while combating hostile users. Similarly, Jones evokes quotes from Muhammad as well as references to books by James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Michelle Alexander and their significant contributions to discourse on racial inequality. Collectively, these cultural texts were deployed against harassers as symbols of resistance that create space for their communities.

These strategies speak to the second research question by highlighting the ways that POTD streamers from marginalized backgrounds have responded to these challenges by fostering inclusive, diverse, and equitable communities in response to their continued mistreatment on Twitch and throughout the social media entertainment industry. Twitch's decision to stop promoting POTD streamers limits exposure of the event as well as potential ad revenue; mitigating the POTD streamer's potential to do complementary labor in the same way that Betar did in the third chapter. It isn't that Twitch outright believes that the POTD streamers are problematic themselves, but that relying primarily on an ad-share revenue model limits the company's ability to create additional profits. This model demands user engagement and

interaction to increase the number of ads shown to audiences, meaning that coordinated harassment campaigns can be potentially as profitable as benevolent forms of engagement.

The two case studies offer examples of how slippery publicity and hype can be on Twitch and the social media entertainment industry. The media frenzy directed at Betar resembled targeted harassment, but the fact that he participated in it characterized that behavior as trollish entertainment meant to elicit "lulz" (Phillips, 2016), rather than hate raids that were directed at the POTD streamers allowed the discourse about him and the Fall Guys Game to remain positive and lighthearted. This was a crucial complementary behavior that preserved popular interest in this phenomena as a positive example of Twitch's appeal to potential advertisers. In this case, Betar's complementary labor had tremendous economic impact– Fall Guys sold more than 7 million copies in a month whereas Betar accrued more than 233,000 new followers in the 11 days and 9 streams during the Fall Guys frenzy, both of which serve as successful examples of how Twitch can create lucrative opportunities for the people, companies, and brands that they work with.

Conversely, there were moments where the same hype that bolstered Betar's popularity became a negative source of attention that caused Twitch to reduce the POTD streamers' visibility. Limiting any visibility or exposure is antithetical to Twitch's ad-based revenue model, especially since *all* user engagement is monetizable whether benevolent or malevolent. This is complicated further because some of the POTD streamers explicitly monetized these attacks like when Jones' and Adams' enabled 'follower-only' settings that require a user to follow the streamer before they can chat, or when Bhullar leveraged her haters' attention to raise more than $10,000 for her charity event. These examples showcase that marginalized streamers have the potential to monetize their creative output despite the constant threat of targeted harassment or

hate raids, even if it is not as lucrative as the complementary labor that influencers like Betar perform.

However, the most significant barrier to marginalized streamers' ability to do complementary labor is that the controversy generated by these hate raids is incompatible with Twitch's ad revenue logics. Twitch's decision to reduce and then abstain from promoting the POTD reveals that there is a point where even though lucrative, hostile engagement becomes a threat to potential advertisers. To be clear, marginalized identities are not threatening to potential advertisers, but it isn't until Twitch remained silent in the face of their mistreatment when this controversy became a substantial enough threat to warrant shuttering the promotion after only one month. After Jones and his community successfully rallied the support of journalists who explicitly named this user-engagement as racial and sexual harassment. This public negativity and critique of Twitch's failure as a company threatens the company's ad friendliness. Rather than publicly support and defend the victimized streamers to potentially attract *new* brands supportive of Twitch's inclusivity, the platform actively created distance from the event.

The case studies outline that ad revenue was one of Twitch's most consistent logics, and that Twitch's professional relationship with a streamer was largely dependent on the streamer's ability to successfully complement brands and advertisers. This behavior is reinforced further by Twitch's acquisition by Amazon and subsequent reliance on ad revenue that monetizes all forms of user engagement. This in turn inhibits the platform's ability to moderate hateful or discriminatory behaviors like hate raids which contribute valuable audience engagement. As seen from Betar's example in Chapter 3, streamers who complement this ambivalent attitude toward targeted harassment can be financially rewarded and signal their willingness to work with commercial stakeholders, which can then lead to even more lucrative and stable employment

opportunities in the future. Whereas streamers who fail to fall in line by resisting or critiquing Twitch's policies are denied the ability to do complementary labor, especially those who openly discuss the company's failure to keep streamers safe from targeted harassment. For example, the victimized POTD streamers in Chapter 4 were literally removed from public view so that Twitch could attempt to reduce the opportunities to harass them rather than preventing harassment in the first place. Collectively, this dissertation contributes a baseline for evaluating the Twitch-streamer relationship to the literature(s) on platforms, creators and influencers, as well as media industry studies. However, as seen through recent news (D'Anastasio, 2022), this relationship evolves rapidly and further research on complementary and resisting behaviors are required to understand these professional relationships in context of Twitch's economic model over time.

Twitch is the most popular livestreaming platform in NA and Western Europe in part because live interaction has been at its core since its inception. This is common in the social media entertainment industry where platforms compete for network effects which often means that one platform company tends to dominate entire modalities, like how YouTube is the best platform for video on demand and how Instagram is dominant for curated image sharing. While all social media platforms have the potential to expand into more 'serious' forms of cultural production, Twitch's livestreaming modality is of particular importance because it closely resembles the types of broadcasting that were common in legacy cultural industries like television, news, and music. Twitch's interactivity lends a distinct cadence and rhythm to the broadcasts that allow streamers to respond to developing stories or respond to their audience's feedback in real time which are paramount to fostering feelings of community amongst viewers. While this is a useful feature for gaming streamers seeking to monetize their broadcasts, Twitch's control over the monetization of increasingly 'serious' forms of cultural production are

concerning because its reliance on ad revenue currently doesn't distinguish between benevolent and malevolent forms of harassment. While some kinds of trollish harassment, like that seen in Chapter 3 is tolerated and celebrated, when the discourse devolves into bigotry or hate raids alienate brands it limits marginalized streamers from fully participating in the social media entertainment industry.

Call to Action & Recommendations

These critiques are the product of rigorous research and thoughtful consideration of how to create more equitable opportunities for streamers that would lead to a more diverse and inclusive economy for *all* streamers on Twitch. To be fair, Twitch has introduced some improved settings, like "phone-verified chats" that require a user to link their phone number with their profile before being allowed to chat (Rosenblatt, 2019). The company includes multiple resources and recommendations for streamers to combat targeted hate raids, but laments that "unfortunately, there is no single solution to most safety-related issues, particularly when it comes to hate raid attacks from malicious and highly-motivated actors" (Twitch, n.d. "Combating targeted attacks"). Targeted harassment like hate raids is then one of the most consistent threats to the safety of marginalized content creators, and Twitch's admitted ineffectiveness at eliminating hate from their platform presents an opportunity for collaboration between academics, creators, and Twitch employees to innovate strategies that protect vulnerable streamers while developing additional sources of income outside of relying on ad-revenue that does not distinguish between malevolent and benevolent user engagement.

To Twitch's credit, they have been funding Research Fellowships since 2019 that offer a $10,000 grant and an internship with the company's staff (Twitch Blog, 2019). Reviewing the call for applicants reveals a preference for engineering and software development candidates

who could optimize their platform's technical efficiencies, calling for applicants with experience in "Applied Statistics, Computational Social Science, Computer Vision, Information Retrieval, Machine Learning, Natural Language Processing & Speech, Recommender Systems" with a singular nod toward "Additional Research Areas" (Twitch Blog, 2019). However, these Fellowships have been awarded to critical qualitative scholars dedicated to combating online harassment such as Amanda Cullen and Jordan Huffaker in 2020, as well as myself in 2021, signaling an opportunity to continue using critical qualitative methods to create meaningful solutions to targeted harassment on Twitch.

Limitations & Future Research

This dissertation offers two concrete examples that outline how Twitch's relationship with a streamer is largely dependent on if the engagement they attract and generate is a perceived threat to advertisers. While these cases offer a baseline to continue interpreting how the company treats its creators, they are not an exhaustive representation of all of Twitch's working relationships and further research is required to continue both introducing more equitable and inclusive conditions for creators, as well as dispelling online hate. This dissertation relied on publicly accessible tweets to focus on the public communication between Twitch and their streamers. The combination of this sample and inductive thematic analysis methods revealed some of the discursive structures that shape who has access to, and under what conditions, Twitch's lucrative streaming economy.

However, the inability to follow up with how a streamer experienced and made sense of their mistreatment limited this dissertation's ability to speak to what streamer's thought of Twitch's efforts to improve safety. In that capacity, I will begin to negotiate access to and permission from these streamers so that future research may implement ethnographic and semi-

structured interviews with vocational influencers. In future research, I intend to interview the streamers who were attacked during the POTD event to better understand how they resist and critique Twitch's safety offerings, as well as their innovative strategies for protection. Platform resistors are worthy of further analysis because they do important work by publicly criticizing Twitch's safety shortcomings and identifying unequal access to economic opportunities on their platform. This would also permit a longitudinal perspective on professional aspirational streamers to forefront their ability to foster community and monetize their creative output on Twitch and other platforms.

Outside of my interest in the working relationship between streamers and Twitch, I feel compelled to continue researching the relationship between online hate and ad-based engagement revenue models in the social media entertainment industry. As platformization continues and our entertainment, economic, political, and social interactions are increasingly subject to moderation from technology conglomerates like Amazon and Microsoft, it is crucial for scholars to continue studying the actors who manufacture outrage for media attention. Notable examples of this type of scholarship include Whitney Phillips investigation of trolls, memes, and mainstream news stations (2016), as well as Gabriella Coleman's monograph on the hacktivist group Anonymous and their ability to leverage technical savviness to shape political agendas (2015).

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