MONETIZING RELATIONSHIPS: STREAMING ALONE WITH ALL OF YOUR FRIENDS

Karen Skardzius
York University

Background and Context

The last few years have seen massive growth in the popularity of livestreaming video games. The most prominent livestreaming platform Twitch.tv reports that nearly 10 million unique users access their site each day to watch just over 2 million unique streamers, for an average of 106 minutes each (Twitch, 2017). Streamers use this platform to broadcast a diverse range of entertainment content they produce, from playing video games of all genres, to competitive gaming, to creative activities like cooking or painting, to editorial and news content. For some, producing/viewing livestreams is a way of engaging in fan culture or sharing their interests with friends (Consalvo, 2016). For others, it is an avenue into the realm of professionalized gaming (T.L Taylor, 2018). Streaming is quickly becoming one of the major conduits through which video game information and culture travel. Perhaps Twitch.tv says it best, "If it's a big deal, you'll find it on Twitch. And if you're not on Twitch you're missing out" (Twitch, 2017).

This paper is derived from a larger project that examines the experiences of women who livestream video games on the Twitch.tv platform. To date, much of the research that has been done in the area of streaming is concerned with streamers who have a large following and/or derive their main source of income from streaming. Rather than directing more attention to those streamers who have attained 'success' as Twitch would frame it, this study is centered around a group of streamers unique from those who are typically the focus. The main goal of the project is to answer the following questions: What is it like to livestream for women and why do they do it? Who is being promoted in this space and how? In what ways are women supported as streamers (or not)? How might streaming become more accessible to women?

Study Design

To answer these questions, I examined Twitch's policies in detail; I maintained my own Twitch channel for 2 weeks; I purposively sampled 50 Twitch channels run by women, then recorded and analyzed 90 minutes of each of their streams in three 30-minute segments. I also conducted five semi-structured interviews with women who stream on Twitch. Interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes each. To analyze the recordings, I took detailed notes and selectively transcribed portions of each recording. Then I used the qualitative software Nvivo to organize data into themes through several rounds of coding. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed similarly.

For the purposes of this paper, I am focusing on the theme of monetizing relationships. When asked about why they started streaming, everyone I interviewed talked about wanting to meet people who played the same games they did, about making new friends, and that they were already playing games anyway so they might as well do it with other people. Although their initial goals were not necessarily to turn their gaming hobby into a full-time job, each of them referred to the appeal of getting paid to play. This is in keeping with Nancy Baym's (2017) argument that the relationship between work and leisure has become more complicated with the advent of social media, and further that the "commodification of intimacy" (Hochschild, 1985) "increasingly includes an expectation that people use always-on media to turn their selves into products and personal relationships into career opportunities" (Baym, 2017, Relating in the Gig Economy, para. 6). Each of the streamers also talked about having, at some point, attempted to grow their channel, to trying to attain partner status, and while maybe not fully supporting themselves through Twitch, at least aspiring to make more money. Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) writes about this kind of work as aspirational labour. She explains aspirational labour as "a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of getting paid to do what you love. As both a practice and a worker ideology, aspirational labor shifts content creators' focus from the present to the future, dangling the prospect of a career where labor and leisure coexist" (p. 4). For two of the streamers I interviewed, streaming is their full-time career, for the other three it is not, and yet for all of them monetization of the platform holds a lot of sway in how they use Twitch (and are used by it).

Twitch promotes itself using the language of "community". For example, they tell users, "Watch what you love, connect with streamers, and chat with tons of communities" and they tell potential streamers, "Bring your passions; we'll help you build a community around them" (Twitch, 2020). The streamers I interviewed also talked about community and friendship extensively. This made me wonder, what happens when money and technology play central roles in facilitating our connections to others? I found that the ideas of community and friendship become messy and complicated through Twitch, even when making money isn't a primary motivation for a streamer. In this paper I discuss some of the ways monetization (or the possibility thereof) can influence the way people think about and/or treat each other through Twitch. First, I discuss the ways monetization influences community building. Second, I discuss some of the implications of paying for attention. Third, I discuss the pressure streamers feel to perform a particular kind of authenticity around monetization. Finally, I will discuss how monetization creates friction and competition between streamers.

Conclusion

This work contributes the perspectives of 5 women whose experiences have been largely overlooked by existing research about streaming, as well as the analysis of another 50 Twitch channels run by women from diverse backgrounds and streaming interests. These findings demonstrate that the monetization features available to streamers and the everyday practices that have emerged through Twitch centered around monetization have a lot of influence over how people relate to each other, even for those streamers who are not trying to monetize their channels. The body of the submission should be formatted according to the following: Arial font, size 12, single space, left align throughout, double space for new paragraph.

References

Baym, N. K. (2018). Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection. NYU Press.

Consalvo, M. (2016). Player One, Playing with Others Virtually: What's next in game and player studies. Critical Studies in Media Communication, 34(1), 84-87.

Duffy, B. E. (2017). (Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work. Yale University Press.

Hochschild, A. R. (1985). The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling University of California Press.

Taylor, T. L. (2018). Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming. Princeton University Press.

Twitch. (2017). About. Twitch.tv. Retrieved August 28th, 2017 from https://www.twitch.tv/p/about/.

Twitch. (2020). About. Twitch.tv. Retrieved January 20th, 2020 from https://www.twitch.tv/p/en/about/.