GROOMERS, 'TITTIES', & STREAMERS, OH MY!: TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF ANDROCENTRIC PLATFORM GOVERNANCE ON TWITCH

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Introduction & Literature Review: Platform Governance & Androcentrism

Twitch is the largest social live-streaming platform in the Global North, and has historically been an important advertising and community hub for the gaming industry (Johnson & Woodcock, 2018). Twitch's owner, Amazon, demands increasing growth and profit (Yin-Poole, 2024), so the platform must continue attracting new streamers, viewers, and advertisers. However, these new audiences may be at odds with Twitch's core base of white, Asian, cisgender men (Cote, 2020). This means many of Twitch's policies and attempts at platform governance are often implemented inconsistently or in an ad-hoc manner, leading to greater confusion about what is and isn't permissible on the platform (Winslow, 2024). Platform governance, also known as content moderation, harkens to how "platforms don't make content, but they will make important choices about that content; what they will distribute and to whom, how they will connect users and broker their reactions, and what they will refuse" (Gillespie, 2018, pp. 254-255). As Twitch struggles to grow its audience but remains faithful to its core base, questions emerge as to who may be experiencing unfair moderation practices.

Twitch has been an undertheorized platform in the content moderation and platform governance spaces. By reviewing the entire corpus of Twitch Safety blogs (*n* = 38) from 2018 - 2024, we demonstrate that platform governance actually hinders Twitch's ability to attract new streamers and audiences, which would likely help the platform generate more revenue and growth. This is based on Twitch's rather explicit androcentrism in its Safety blogs. Androcentrism occurs in online spaces in implicit and explicit ways, often

through valuing men's input and expertise over women and non-binary individuals, and may often make women feel excluded or unsafe, leading to their chosen or forced removal from these spaces (Sobieraj, 2018). This is compounded in gaming communities, with its own history of toxic geek masculinities (Salter & Blodgett, 2017; Ruberg et al., 2019; Cote, 2020). Twitch is a combination of both, and attempts at its platform governance are consistently rooted in both technology and gaming's androcentrism (Marwick, 2017). Platform governance documents, including blog post announcements, always convey platform values (Gillespie, 2018), and androcentrism emerges as one such predominant value on Twitch. This impacts the potential for streamers' creative labor, reifies gatekeeping in esports and gaming, and upholds hostility in online spaces.

Method

Drawing on the method for studying platforms' forward-facing documents detailed by Maddox & Malson (2020), this study examines 38 safety blog posts by Twitch from May 2018 through January 2024. The reason for those dates is that every one of these blogs has topics that have been deemed important, or threatening enough, to warrant this extra regulatory, expedient, and often punitive action. Blog posts are timely communication tools used by platforms to voice changes before they are enacted in official governance capacities in the site's official community guidelines. Community guidelines, and blog posts announcing changes to said documents, reveal Twitch's values about who can stream and advertise, and under what conditions. Furthermore, these decision documents change over time, and by studying these variations, we gain insight into one, how creators and streamers manage careers on the whims of platforms. Our analysis of these documents over the past several years adheres to what Couldry and van Dijck (2015) argue in internet research, "a materialist account of the processes…must precisely *hold* on to the memories of those older versions of the social as a reference point against which to judge the hegemonic role in hosting social life now played by digital platforms" (emphasis in original; p. 2). By taking a snapshot of these policy change announcements over the last several years, we can document platform power. Furthermore, by connecting these announcements to the real-world events that beget them, we present a historicized look at platform governance. Studying Twitch's policy change announcements is a phenomenon deeply embedded in a real-life context, and it provides insights into both Twitch as a platform and also the broader precarity of online content creation.

For the analysis of the documents, each author read and re-read each post, taking notes about recurring thoughts, themes, words, patterns, and ideas. Upon conclusion of individual readings, the authors came together to discuss similarities and discrepancies in their findings. This is the approach to textual analysis outlined by Stuart Hall (1976),

in which the analysis portion of textual analysis is the identifying and contextualizing of recurring themes, words, and ideas in ways that allow for in-depth understandings to emerge.

Preliminary Findings & Discussion

Ongoing analysis has revealed significant evidence of two predominant findings: First, through these announcements, Twitch not-so-subtly conveys who their core streamer and viewer audiences are. This is revealed in one post from November 2022, in which Twitch addresses claims that streamers were grooming, or preparing minors for inappropriate physical and sexual relationships with adults, on and off the platform. Twitch claims to potential advertisers that "70% of users are between the ages of 18 and 34" (Twitch, n.d.), but acknowledging pedophilia as a potential threat to the platform reveals that there are many more children using Twitch than the platform reports publicly. With the phrase "grooming" being a conservative and often alt-right buzzword to criminalize queer, trans, and non-binary behavior (McMillan, 2022), it is unclear if Twitch truly has a grooming problem or if the platform is virtue signaling to its core gaming audience of predominantly white or Asian, and cisgender, men (Cote, 2020). This use of conservative buzzwords underscores an additional aspect of audience signaling through policy change announcements on nudity and sexual content. It is well established in platform governance research that policies restricting nudity and sexual content are done to police women and bar their participation in digital spaces (Are, 2021; Are, 2023). However, on Twitch, the platform needs provocative content to maintain its audiences' interest and continue growing the platform outside of just the gaming community. While Twitch's policy about potential grooming attempts to police a potential threat, the dress code policies actively curtail women's potential for cultural production on the platform – which can prevent attracting new users to the platform.

Our second main preliminary finding is buttressed by existing social media policy analyses in which community is heavily touted as a value and benefit of being on the platform (Maddox & Malson, 2020; Scharlach, Hallinan, & Shifman, 2023). While Twitch celebrates community, it becomes apparent in the policy change announcements that some users are allowed and celebrated, but others are moderated extensively. Moderation announcement changes reveal who the platform's "favorite" users are. While moderation documents always harken to "ideal" users (Gillespie, 2018), Twitch's changes specifically reveal an androcentric ideal from which Twitch prioritizes moderation and governance issues. Such an analysis ultimately reveals how androcentrism is governed into existence and connects the realities of streamers, gamers, and creators to explicit rulings of platform governance, further contributing to precarity in digital labor.

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