RECONTEXTUALIZING VIOLENCE IN REAL TIME: LIVESTREAMING & THE GOVERNANCE OF INCONSISTENCY ON TWITCH.TV

Brandon C. Harris
University of Alabama

Christine H. Tran
University of Toronto

Christopher J. Persaud
Intel Labs

Introduction, Literature Review, & Method

How does inconsistency become an institution? Here, we examine platform governance and moderation on Amazon's Twitch.tv as a cultural practice. Through case studies and thematic analysis, we showcase moments of regulatory inconsistency that are constitutive of how Twitch manages harm. Our analysis identifies contexts, temporalities, and violence as critical themes for identifying Twitch's inconsistent moderation. We offer a playbook for better understanding livestreaming platform governance as an iterative process which frequently targets vulnerable streamers.

We applied thematic analysis to two case studies to document how regulatory inconsistencies are directed at historically marginalized streamers. We began with an inductive approach examining Twitch's response to: 1) Kai Cenat's impromptu community meet-up which was labeled a riot by the NYPD and 2) When Twitch modified their clothing and attire policy three times in one month to curtail the so-called 'topless meta', where a handful of women staged their cleavage to imply full nudity and optimize viewer engagement. Then, we performed a deductive grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2008) on Twitch's Community Guidelines and Terms of Service documents to further highlight the platform's unbalanced governance.

Undergirding our three identified thematics on Twitch governance--contexts, temporalities, and violence--is an intellectual debt to livestreaming research from feminist game studies, which has recognized how feminized labor becomes embedded into digital entertainment, underscoring the tensions between who is burdened to further

contextualize their content versus who can "just play" at being a passive content creator (eg: Consalvo, 2012; Gray et al, 2018; Phillips, 2020; Shaw et al, 2019).

Findings & Discussion

Contexts

Context sensitive moderation poses a special challenge across different kinds of social media (Caplan, 2018). Context is a site of collapse (Marwick and boyd, 2011) and collision (Davis and Jurgenson, 2013). By selling constant and visible presence through video broadcast, Twitch is a commodifier of geographic, social, and temporal contextual experiences. Simultaneously, the platform is at the institutional mercy to the contexts which individual streamers themselves bring to the platform. Herein, Twitch's categorization of specific scandals as "metas" (i.e., fads or norms) establishes hierarchies regarding what Twitch deems acceptable cultural production. For example: in March 2021, Twitch explicitly addressed the proliferation of swim suited streamers, and those who harass them, as "Hot Tub Meta" (Twitch, 2021). In December 2023--in the wake of "topless meta" over woman creators allegedly staging implied nudity--Twitch.tv overturned its decision to sanction "artistic nudity" in live video broadcasts, just two days after the initial revision to their Community Guidelines permitting nudity under accurate content labels. Meta-making relegates certain content to domains like women's work or other peripheral designations that signify lower social status outside the privileged "magic circle" of toxic technocultures (Massanari, 2016). Context--and who is denied it--especially challenges the marginalization of users through "meta."

Understanding Twitch is complicated because it straddles multiple platforms, localities, and modalities. Twitch tends to be most proactive about governing behavior on its own platform, but users have developed an iterative and playful, if dangerous, culture that innovates new ways to weaponize platform features like using emotes to create racist attacks on streamers (Grayson, 2019). Clipping, or using Twitch's video recording feature, has become another weapon to police streamers since users can submit out of context videos of a streamer to elicit punishment from Twitch employees (Flint, 2023). Clipping is a crucial strategy in policing some forms of cultural production, specifically using video clips of a handful of women as evidence of a 'topless meta' on Twitch to imply that every female streamer uses the suggestion of nudity to build their audience (Grayson, 2021), despite that nearly 80% of the platform's streamers are men (Twitch Advertising, n.d.). Twitch's response to controversies leads to inconsistent enforcement of the rules, which further exacerbates inequalities among streamers since the most vulnerable and marginalized streamers are subjected to the most stringent policing (Hortenski, 2024; Grayson 2019, 2021).

Temporalities

Twitch's emphasis on "real time" meditation between broadcasts and audiences create challenging temporalities for violence. Under these temporal regimes, the contexts of content creation, surveillance, and governance collapse as Twitch manages what is permissible on a case-by-case basis. See for example, the controversial "contextual

exception" clauses in its Community Guidelines wherein otherwise "objectionable" performance, attire, and activities can be sanctioned if geographic context fits. We view cultural production on Twitch as a platform assemblage of performance, practices, and people under the narrative of "real time". As digital technologies challenge what Sarah Sharma (2014) terms the "chronopolitics" of human interaction, livestreaming must reckon with the ways that demands for instant and authentic interaction discipline users into new regimes of performing "temporal" labor (see also: Johnson et al., 2019; Gregg, 2011). Twitch's always-on nature presents methodological challenges for researchers; broadcasts disappear from channels after 60 days, which leaves researchers to rely on paratexts and selectively archived materials (Ruberg and Cullen, 2022). We must consider how Twitch users weaponize ephemeral affordances to enact both lulz-based trolling for mischievous humor (Phillips, 2016) as well as hate raids on and off the platform (Grayson, 2021).

Violence

As Twitch scales, streamers, audiences, and hostile users all create innovative ways to express themselves and their world views. This results in studied struggles for representation on the platform, as many hard core game loyalists consider any female, queer, or non-white or non-Asian identity unwelcome on Twitch. Twitch scholars have elaborated on how streamers manipulate and encourage audience engagement to elevate their political rhetoric in a crowded media landscape (Harris et al., 2023. Likewise, research has begun to address how audiences attack a streamer's claims to authenticity and challenge their ability to grow their audience (Tran, 2022), how queer streamers perform moderation labor to make themselves accessible to audiences while risking queerphobic abuse (Persaud & Perks, 2022), and how they deploy hate raids as a form of targeted harassment to police who is and isn't allowed to become a streamer (Meisner, 2023). Platform governance literature on Twitch has examined the rhetorical labor of institutional documents such as Term of Service to construct gendered subjectivities of "streamers" as antithetical to certain kinds of sexual performance (Ruberg, 2020; Zolides, 2020). Streamers themselves have self-deputized themselves and peer networks to perform moderation work (Cullen and Kairam, 2022, Thach et al., 2022), generating as another field wearing cultural are creators take on a neoliberalism self-responsibility for their own protection, survival, and prosperity.

Conclusions & Trajectories

However, as platformization continues Twitch (and its owner Amazon, LLC.) attempts to bring additional aspects of cultural production under Twitch's control, it is important for scholars to develop new methods and perspectives for studying the livestreaming behemoth. Twitch is attempting to diversify its reputation as just a source for gaming content, and attempting to bring in other traditional sports, music festivals, and concerts broadcasted on Twitch to increase the platform's value in a crowded media ecosystem. Therefore, the authors contribute their collective expertise on Twitch, the creator economy, and synthesize current trends in research while recommending future areas of concern for research on Twitch's potential for digital and platformized violence.

References

Caplan, R. (2018). Content or context moderation?. Data and Society Research Institute. https://apo.org.au/node/203666

Charmaz, K. (2008). Reconstructing grounded theory. *The SAGE handbook of social research methods*, 461-478.

Consalvo, M. (2012). Confronting toxic gamer culture: A challenge for feminist game studies scholars. Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology.

Cullen, A. L. L., & Kairam, S. R. (2022). *Practicing moderation: Community moderation as reflective practice*. https://www.amazon.science/publications/practicing-moderation-community-moderation-as-reflective-practice

Davis, J. L., & Jurgenson, N. (2014). Context collapse: Theorizing context collusions and collisions. *Information, communication & society*, *17*(4), 476-485.

Flint, E. (2023). Twitch's new 'topless' meta needs to be shut down immediately, say viewers. *Gaming Bible.* https://www.gamingbible.com/news/platform/twitch/twitchs-topless-meta-needs-shutting-down-says-viewers-850606-20231211

Gray, K. L., Voorhees, G., & Vossen, E. (Eds.). (2018). *Feminism in play*. Springer.

Grayson, N. (2019). Twitch Still hasn't fixed its racist emote problem. *Kotaku.* https://kotaku.com/twitch-still-hasnt-fixed-its-racist-emote-problem-1835253131.

Grayson N. (2021). Marginalized streamers beg Twitch to 'do better' in wake of hate raids, poor pay. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2021/08/11/twitch-do-better-hate-raids/.

Gregg, M. (2011). *Work's intimacy*. Polity Press.

Harris, B. C., Foxman, M., & Partin, W. C. (2023). "Don't Make Me Ratio You Again": How Political Influencers Encourage Platformed Political Participation. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(2), https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177944.

Hortenski, D. (2024). Twitch streamer appalled after 'fake' mod shuts down her stream. *Dextero*. https://www.dexerto.com/twitch/twitch-streamer-appalled-after-fake-mod-shuts-down-her-stream-2525992/

Johnson, M. R., Carrigan, M., & Brock, T. (2019). The imperative to be seen: The moral economy of celebrity video game streaming on Twitch.tv. *First Monday*. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i8.8279

Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, *13*(1), 114–133. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313

Massanari, A. (2016). # Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures. *New media & society*, *19*(3), 329-346.

Meisner, C. (2023). Networked Responses to Networked Harassment? Creators' Coordinated Management of "Hate Raids" on Twitch. *Social Media+ Society*, *9*(2), 20563051231179696.

Persaud, C. J., & Perks, M. E. (2022). Beauty From the Waist Up: Twitch Drag, Digital Labor, and Queer Mediated Liveness. *Television & New Media*, 15274764221080912. https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764221080912.

Phillips, A. (2020). *Gamer trouble: Feminist confrontations in digital culture*. NYU Press.

Phillips, W. (2016). *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. MIT Press.

Ruberg, B. (2020). "Obscene, pornographic, or otherwise objectionable": Biased definitions of sexual content in video game live streaming. *New Media & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820920759

Ruberg, B., & Cullen, A. L. L. (2020). Feeling for an audience: The gendered emotional labor of video game live streaming. *Digital Culture & Society*, *5*(2), 85–102. https://www.degruyter.com/transcript/view/journals/dcs/5/2/article-p85.xml

Sharma, S. (2014). *In the meantime : temporality and cultural politics*. Duke University Press.

Shaw, A., Agloro, A., Nguyen, J., Phillips, A. D., & Ruberg, B. (2019). *Feminist and Queer Game Studies*. Oxford University Press.

Thach, H., Mayworm, S., Delmonaco, D., & Haimson, O. (2022). (In) visible moderation: A digital ethnography of marginalized users and content moderation on Twitch and Reddit. *new media & society*, 14614448221109804.

Tran, C. H. (2022). "Never battle alone": Egirls and the gender (ed) war on video game live streaming as "real" work. *Television & New Media*, *23*(5), 509-520.

Twitch (2021). Let's Talk About Hot Tub Streams. *Twitch Blog*. https://blog.twitch.tv/en/2021/05/21/lets-talk-about-hot-tub-streams.

Twitch Advertising (n.d.). Twitch Advertising, "Audience". Twitch.

https://twitchadvertising.tv/audience/.

Zolides, A. (2020). Gender moderation and moderating gender: Sexual content policies in Twitch's community guidelines. *New Media & Society*. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1461444820942483.