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SELF-MONETIZATION AS A DOUBLE BIND: THE GOVERNANCE OF AFFECTIVE LABOR OF BRAZILIAN STREAMERS

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Introduction

Live streaming is an activity performed by users on media platforms, characterized by the real-time broadcasting of content with simultaneous audience interaction. Twitch (owned by Amazon), the pioneer and largest live streaming platform, markets itself as a space that fosters “belonging by enabling streamers to build community” (Twitch, 2025). While framed as a leisure activity that encourages socialization, live streaming demands significant labor: streamers must plan and organize their work, maintaining constant dedication, investing their subjectivity as well as their capitals (Bourdieu, 1986). As a result, categories such as socialization and monetization, pleasure and labor, user and worker blur and intertwine.

Considering these contradictions, this research aimed to examine how the governance of live streaming platforms shapes the subjective experiences and sociability of Brazilian streamers, particularly in relation to the monetization of leisure and social bonds. Drawing on a digital ethnography on a live streaming platform and labor life stories interviews with Brazilian streamers, we argue that Twitch mobilizes a double bind of self-monetization: it promises personal and financial fulfillment while instrumentalizing meaning, affects, and self-commodification under the guise of community-driven participation.

Method

This study combines digital ethnography (Fragoso et al., 2011) on Twitch - observing streams, channels, chat dynamics, and platform policies - with labor life story interviews

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(Carretero, 2017) involving seven Brazilian streamers (4 women, 3 men). Participants, active on Twitch for at least three years, dedicate an average of 20 hours weekly to streaming. Five rely on additional jobs for subsistence, while only one earns sufficient income from streaming (primarily through a betting sponsorship).

Interviews explored family histories, work routines, platform metrics, and affective experiences, revealing how social structures and individual trajectories shape streaming as labor. The analysis integrates frameworks from Psychosociology, Clinical Sociology, Platform Studies, and Sociology of Work, alongside critical perspectives from Communication and Cultural Studies.

Findings & Discussion

Participants' experiences reveal that streaming occupies a complex and uncertain position for them. The resemblance to leisure activities, lack of remuneration, and divergence from traditional employment structures make it challenging to recognize it as legitimate labor - both for streamers themselves and their families. Furthermore, companies actively obscure the activity's status as work by discursively framing it as leisure and socialization. Simultaneously, to perform the activity within the governance constraints imposed by platforms, streamers describe a work organization that demands personal capital, time, routine and consistency. These demands are closely tied to algorithmic management and the market-driven, consumer-oriented logic that underpins platforms like Twitch.

Despite the low earnings, being a streamer serves as a core identity marker for participants, as the activity provides a form of reciprocity - contrasting with their other labor experiences - that renders it rewarding: meaning and recognition. Live streaming was described as a vital means of socialization, community belonging, affective bonding, skill development, and validation - all aspects that help constitute meaning (Dejours, 2011). However, we identify a trap in the excess of meaning ascribed to the work. On Twitch, there appears to be a systematic instrumentalization of meaning - particularly through the obfuscation of streaming's labor nature - which masks the platform's inherent contradictions, softening conflicts, anxieties, and material costs. The meaning produced through streaming is co-opted by the platform, which uses it to justify non-payment (framing streaming as leisure) and foster continued participation (through promises of financial success via passion-driven work), under the "do what you love" rhetoric (Duffy, 2017).

This surplus of meaning also fuels streamers' subjective justifications for engaging in an under/unpaid activity, as defense mechanisms like rationalization (Viana Braz, 2020) align individuals with organizational demands, fostering adaptation and, consequently, exploitation. Meaning and the rationalization of precarity thus become central tools in shaping working conditions on Twitch. They are not secondary consequences but structural elements of the platform's governance, embedding exploitation into the very fabric of what is framed as creative, autonomous, and fulfilling work.

Of course, meaning alone does not sustain their labor. It is intertwined with the hope for earnings, rooted in the neoliberal meritocratic ideal disseminated by platforms and embedded in societal values (Dardot & Laval, 2016). The paradoxical demands of

platform success - “devote yourself fully, but don’t expect payment, as this isn’t ‘real’ work” - trap streamers in a *double bind* (Watzlawick et al., 2011). They juggle formal jobs (which fund their streaming) while striving to “make it” on platforms during free time, yet this is perceived as insufficient. If they commit fully, they risk losing income for basic survival. Thus, failure is always individualized. These pressures generate psychological distress, met with overwork, anxiety over perceived inadequacy, and self-blame.

The self-monetization emerges not only as a response to neoliberal dynamics - marked by the logic of investment in human capital (Gaulejac, 2007), the culture of financialization (Haiven, 2014), the transformation of the subject into a self-enterprise (Dardot & Laval, 2016), and the structural labor precarity in Brazil (Abílio, 2021) - but also as a phenomenon deeply shaped by the digital platforms governance. By establishing parameters of visibility, socialization, and self-management, Twitch reconfigures subjectivities under the promise of personal and financial fulfillment. This dynamic demands internalization of market logic as an identity project, shaping subjects' own commodification as a condition for success. Thus, the self-monetization reveals itself as a doubly coercive mechanism: a product of both systemic precarity and a digital culture that transforms the exposure and profitability of the self into existential imperatives, reinforcing the subsumption of life under financial demands.

We conclude that Twitch’s monetization logic subsumes leisure, affect, social relations, network usage, and free time into financialized mechanisms, reshaping behaviors and structuring streamers’ labor and subjectivation processes. While the platform excludes “small” streamers from payment for failing to meet industrial-scale audience metrics, it profits from their emotional and affective labor by building communities and fostering bonds, extracting value for corporate gain. The commodification of affective ties, coupled with the financial criteria dictating “success” in these relationships, reconfigure streamers’ subjectivities, transforming how they engage with and perceive affection on the platform - and ultimately, themselves.

Conclusions

The analysis developed reveals that live streaming, as an emerging form of labor, not only reflects but also intensifies the paradoxes of contemporary work through the self-monetization imperative. It exposes the dual nature of governance in live streaming platforms: while capturing affects, social bonds, and free time to convert them into financial value, also creates openings for the emergence of meaning, connections, and collective practices that challenge the logic of neoliberal entrepreneurship. The activity naturalizes self-exploitation under the myth of individual merit; nonetheless, it exposes cracks in the system by demonstrating that the pursuit of recognition and community - even when instrumentalized by platforms - can be reinterpreted as a foundation for unexpected solidarities (Woodcock, 2023).

Precarity on live streaming platforms is not a mere side effect but a structural pillar of a governance pattern that monetizes subjectivity and transforms inequalities into fuel for accumulation. In light of this, it becomes urgent to rethink traditional categories of labor, questioning not only the working conditions of streamers but also the very paradigm that reduces human relationships to profitability metrics. The future of work on content

production platforms is not predetermined - and it is precisely in the contradictions mapped here that the possibilities for its reinvention lie.

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