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Live Streamers on Twitch.tv as Social Media Influencers: Chances and Challenges for Strategic Communication

Introduction

The term “social media influencer” has become a widespread, if sometimes nebulous, way of describing a digital celebrity who is able to inform and encourage particular consumer choices. It also in turn refers to the broader trend of companies using these social media celebrities to promote, advertise, or market their brands. This brings to mind the new celebrities of websites like photo platform *Instagram*, as well as scandals about non-disclosure of sponsorship deals blurring the lines between the celebrity as a genuine spokesperson for their own interests, and someone in the pocket of corporate interests. While there has been important research on *Youtube* (Burgess and Green, 2018) and *Instagram* (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), video game live streaming platform *Twitch* has yet to be considered in this way.

In this paper, we therefore turn the analytic lens of strategic communication to focus on the live streaming platform *Twitch.tv*, or simply *Twitch*. In 2017 and 2018 there were over two million unique monthly streamers on the platform broadcasting live video content, with several tens of thousands of partners (an influential layer of streamers who share revenue with *Twitch*, sometimes professionalised) and over one hundred thousand affiliates (an intermediate layer of streamers who can share revenue, semi-professionalised). The average

Twitch broadcast contains live footage and sound from the digital game being played (or, rarely, the non-gaming activity taking place), a webcam showing the face and surroundings of the broadcaster, and often a number of peripheral features, such as links to other social media sites or information about recent donations or competitions. The audience is comprised of at least fifteen million daily visitors who collectively watch over three hundred billion minutes of live-streamed video content distributed via the platform each year (Twitch, 2018a). Although it remains less well-known than *Facebook*, *Instagram*, or *Twitter*, *Twitch* has become a central part of the platformized internet (Johnson & Woodcock, In Press), and an online location that is profoundly transforming the creation, broadcast, and profitability of user-made content. As such, it is both now a platform on which streaming celebrities wield significant power over their fan bases (potentially into the millions of viewers), and one that companies are increasingly looking to as an online space to develop social media influencers who will support and further their branding agendas.

As such, we will explore how live streaming is developing into a form of strategic communication for companies and brands, and a major new platform for the growth and development of social media influencers. To do so we first address a literature review of *Twitch* and live streaming as a whole, noting both the state of present research and the gaps within that present work - such as a conceptualisation of live streamers as social media influencers. We then cover our method, consisting of both one hundred in-person interviews and extensive ethnographic observation on both *Twitch* itself, and many offline gaming events across several countries and two continents. We then address in detail the potential effectiveness of live streamers as influencers by drawing on this data. We demonstrate that there are many ways streamers can be effective in this role by being self-motivated and

through external connections to relevant companies, that the platform encourages and regulates this sort of behaviour through the tracking of statistics and the impact of one's broadcast, and how important performativity is to streamers looking to develop their media offerings into this direction.

We then consider *Twitch* influencers in a wider context, asking two questions. Firstly, how does *Twitch* operate as a social media communication platform on which strategic communication can take place; second, what skills do *Twitch* streamers need to deploy if they are to be effective strategic communicators? The former of these will entail the first analysis to date of live streaming platforms from this perspective, and given the size and impact of live streaming (as we discuss shortly), this is an essential foundation for understanding live streaming's potential for strategic communication. The latter will then progress into examining why some broadcasters are successful taking on this role, why others struggle, and how the specifics of the platform shape the nature of its communication possibilities. By combining these two, we look to present a thorough analysis of *Twitch* from a strategic communication perspective, and establish the basis for further enquiries of this sort into live streaming platforms. Equally, more broadly, these are increasingly important topics because very large numbers of people now regularly consume and interact with online content in this way, with the practices of streamers becoming increasingly professionalised. We conclude that *Twitch* is a major new platform for organisations both within and beyond the videogames industry to engage with their publics, and one with significant potential for strategic communication today.

Platforms and Strategic Communication

In order to address our research questions – how *Twitch* operates as a platform for strategic communication, and what skills must streamers deploy in this endeavour – several bodies of literature demand our attention. Specifically, we must consider live streaming as a phenomenon, *Twitch* as a platform, live streaming's connections with gaming culture and practice, and strategic communication itself, especially in a context of contemporary digital social media and the opportunities afforded by such technologies and their associated communities. The newness of the platform and live streaming practice as a whole affords us significant potential for new enquiries into its impacts (in strategic communication or beyond), but also makes a thorough assessment of what little existing work there is on the practice especially important.

Live streaming and Twitch

To begin with live streaming, we note that the practice remains in its relative infancy, but scholarship has begun to emerge on the topic. Just as other social media platforms have reshaped different kinds of media production and enabled new kinds of influence and communication, *Twitch's* central contribution to this wider phenomenon is in what we might call the democratisation of who can provide television-like content to viewers (Pires & Simon, 2015). By this we mean that through *Twitch*, providing live video broadcast content is no longer limited to major industrial-economic actors, but rather a possibility for a large portion of the “general public”. While *Twitch* shares some commonalities with other social media platforms, the ability to provide live televised content on this scale is unique to *Twitch* - video sharing site *YouTube* of course provides this ability for recorded video, but (despite its new live service) produces little live content. Specifically, *Twitch* is a platform on which two million people regularly broadcast their own live video content, and over one hundred million people

tune in to watch this content (Twitch, 2018a). These are numbers that could compete with even the most successful traditional television channels. Like other platforms (Graham & Anwar, 2018), *Twitch* has created a near-global market for particular “new forms of media industry work” (Taylor, 2018, p. 35). This represents what Cunningham & Craig (2016) have called “social media entertainment”, a convergent media form which carries with it our expectations of how social media works, while also producing broadcast entertainment forms that are easily recognisable as distinct, bounded, and sometimes even scripted and professionally-produced, video broadcasts.

As we have argued elsewhere (Johnson & Woodcock, In Press), the platform’s “emphasis on amateur content production” as well as the striking “proximity between producers and consumers” are both important for understanding its rapid success. In the first case, anyone with a small amount of technical knowledge and a sufficiently fast internet connection can broadcast themselves on *Twitch*, opening the possibility of creating live content to a larger number than ever before; while the ability of consumers to talk directly to the producers of this content, and have them talk back, marks out the platform as one offering a striking and newfound intimacy between the new digital celebrities who stream on it, and their fans. *Twitch* consequently exhibits a distinctive culture as a platform, and in the channels of individual streamers (Gandolfi, 2016). On *Twitch* new communities are emerging (Hamilton, Garretson, & Kerne, 2014) which focus around particular streamers, and generate a sense of belonging and a shared culture between a broadcaster and their viewers. This is a major part of the appeal of watching *Twitch* for many viewers, building up a sense of association with other gamers who share one’s interests, and in many cases shared cultural touchstones both within gaming and wider geek culture.

Twitch and gaming

The specifically *gaming* focus of *Twitch* is crucial for understanding the platform. While watching others play has long been a part of gaming culture (Taylor, 2016), this has traditionally been limited to watching friends play in a home context, or before that watching others play in arcades (which have declined almost completely in recent decades, except within the Japanese context). There has always been enjoyment to be found learning about games by watching others play; witnessing the skilled play of another, akin to watching a skilled musician or sportsperson; and sharing an experience with fellow players. *Twitch* enables far larger numbers of people to tune in to watching games live than ever before, gives easy and immediate access to the highest levels of game play, and lets all of this happen from the comfort of one's home. On the back of these developments, many streamers are pursuing and finding careers in monetizing their live-streamed content, with impressive numbers of aspirants looking to find an income producing such content. There are similarities with other forms of social media (Marwick, 2013; Duffy, 2017; Abidin, 2018), although these are expressed here within the context of video game, not only social media, culture.

Our own work has consequently addressed to date the lives and careers of professional and aspiring-professional live streamers (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017), the methods of monetization on *Twitch* by streamers eager to make money from their content creation activities (Johnson & Woodcock, In Press), as well as the affective and emotional labour that *Twitch* streamers perform (Woodcock & Johnson, In Press). We also note that participation in and on *Twitch* is structured along lines of gender (Witkowski, Recktenwald, & Manning, 2016; Dargonaki, 2018), disability (Johnson, 2018), race (Gray, 2017) and other demographic markers, although it is also a platform striving to offer and allow safe spaces to many different

marginalised communities (Batchelor, 2017; Hernandez, 2018), in doing so raising significantly the visibility of gamers who are not cisgendered, straight, white, and male. *Twitch* is thus rapidly becoming a key part of the social media infrastructure online, and the ways in which streamers and audiences interact is central to unpacking the phenomena more broadly.

Twitch and strategic communication

As we can see, much of the research so far on *Twitch* has focused on the role of the platform, the career paths and emerging forms of work, or the new cultures of streaming. However, what is less explored at present is how this fits with existing media practices or ecosystems. Rather than considering *Twitch* as an exceptional case study or example, there is little that traces its connections with existing practices, advertising, and communication. In this paper we therefore turn to addressing *Twitch* and the wider phenomenon of live streaming through the lens of strategic communication. Although the concept itself is somewhat amorphous (Nothhaft, Werder, Verčič, & Zeffass, 2018), we believe a valuable initial definition “strategic communication” is that it entails actively promoting the objectives of a particular group or body via any kind of communicative practice (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 3). It is consequently a potentially wide field, and in its widest form could be understood as drawing on “organization theory, communication theory, leadership and management theory, message effects, narrative theory, crisis communication, public relations theory, socio-cultural theory, political science, organizational communication, communication philosophy, critical theory, branding, reputation management, ethics, and business, among others” (Werder, Nothhaft, Verčič, & Zeffass, 2018, p. 334).

What therefore differentiates it from other kinds of communication is that it is done in reference to a specific organisation, body or interest, and that it “promotes the organization

in all its utterances to the outside world” (van Ruler, 2018, p. 372). This is valuable for such actors because strategic communication and planning are especially important in the contemporary digital world (Thorson, 2013). In turn, the capacities and possibilities of modern digital technology enable us to see certain aspects of strategic communication as something of an “agile management process”: they enable the testing of company decisions by continually presenting them to relevant publics and altering and negotiating them according to feedback (van Ruler, 2018, p. 367). By conveying strategic choices (such as new products) to viewers, changes can be made to decisions or paths before too many resources or too much time has been committed to them, rather than engaging with relevant publics at a later date. In turn, each of the two words involved in the discipline’s name help shed light on its nature, and why the actions of *Twitch* streamers might interest us. The strategic aspect, specifically, points our attention to the fact that the term “strategy” traditionally meant a “calculus of purpose, ends, and means under conditions of limited resources, as seen against a horizon of predictability” (Nothhaft et al, 2018, p. 360). This is communication in pursuit of precise, rationalised, specified goals.

There has also been significant attention paid specifically to the intersections between social media and strategic communication. Strategic communication has been profoundly changed by the advent of social media (Scott, 2007), and many see social media as having significant positive potential for the future of the practice (Wright & Hinson, 2009). As Lewis (2009, p. 10) puts it, the “emergence of the Internet and social media have had a tremendous impact on the theory and practice” of strategic communicating, leading to a situation where the digital has “turned the marketing world upside down” (Fastenau & Fritsch, 2009). For example, blogs have had an immense impact on marketing practice (Chung, Kim, Trammell,

& Porter, 2007), generally helping but sometimes damaging consumer interactions via the poor decisions or inexperience of those managing the process (Scoble & Israel, 2006). Whether run by an individual employee, or run “officially” by a company official, the ability for rapid dissemination of information offers a lot of opportunities. As a result, many “corporations now rely on social networking sites to inform consumers of their latest happenings” (Long, 2011, p. 145). This consumer-focused strategic communication takes advantage of the statistical and data possibilities that social media platforms offer to sponsors, corporate users or other users deemed to be important; a tremendous amount of information can be disseminated by organizational actors, but data also flows the other way.

This means success depends on being able to measure and analyse the effects of communication, an affordance that is readily available on the *Twitch* platform, even to smaller streamers. While this can mean viewer and follower counts, it can also entail more detailed information about monetisation in terms of donations, cheering, click-through purchases, and affiliate links, both available to *Twitch* and the streamer. Due to the operation of the platform, there are multiple ways that the streamer can interact with the viewer - through the video stream, chat, as well as the forms of monetisation - and vice versa. In turn, the communication in this case refers to interaction with an audience that is more personal in nature than that of a mass media broadcast (Paul, 2011), yet still communication designed to enable an “organization’s strategic goals and objectives” (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 4). As such, we follow van Ruler’s (2018, p. 379) proposition that we should understand “communication as the constituting pillar of strategic communication, and strategy [as] the context in which strategic communication takes place.” The strength of utilising the literature from the field of strategic communication is that it brings a robust set of analytical perspectives that can be

used to thoroughly explore *Twitch*, particularly by conceptualising it as a communication platform in relation to the relationships and value it generates for outside organizations, and to aspiring streamers who find themselves emerging as the most recent kind of social media influencers on the internet. It is through this lens that we will address our interview data, to which we now turn.

Method

The data from this paper emerges from a large research project with *Twitch*, which began in 2016 and remains ongoing. Over the course of three years, the researchers have conducted primarily interview and ethnographic data collection with streamers, in large part through a collaboration with the platform. For the interview component, over one hundred semi-structured interviews have been completed with professional streamers (*Twitch* is their sole or overwhelmingly primary income) and semi-professional streamers (*Twitch* is one income of two or several), ranging from between ten minutes to over an hour. Some were organised with the assistance and facilitation of *Twitch*, while others were secured on an ad-hoc basis at these events. Throughout the interviews, we were able to explore questions of social media influencing, power dynamics on the platform, fame and celebrity on *Twitch*, and the relationships between *Twitch* and other platforms and contemporary online cultural spaces. All of the interviews were recorded on tablet computers, which captured both video and audio. This worked particularly well in the context of *Twitch*, as the streamers were comfortable (except a small number of notable exceptions) carrying out interviews in this way because it was similar to streamers' interactions with the platform (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017). The audio from this was transcribed into a written form that has then been coded and

referred to for the research. Coding proceeded from a grounded theory approach, focused on identifying themes that many respondents commented on – for example, sponsorship, the use of statistics, methods for connecting with broadcasters, and so forth. All names used in this paper to denote interviewees are arbitrarily selected, and bear no relationship to the original streamer.

Alongside interviewing the researchers have also carried out extensive ethnographic research at *Twitch's* major yearly event “TwitchCon” in 2016, 2017 and 2018, alongside many other major live gaming events across the United Kingdom, the USA, Germany, and Poland. This fieldwork provided the access for the interviews, facilitated mainly by *Twitch*. In particular, TwitchCon is a yearly event that brings together streamers and their audiences at conventions centres in California. These physical events provided the opportunity to conduct in-person interviews, both arranged directly by *Twitch* and by the researchers during the event. The ethnographic component included attending panels and talks at the event, spending time on the convention floor, informal interviewing, and immersion within the culture of *Twitch*.

This physical ethnography has been complemented with several hundred hours of ethnographic observation of over two hundred *Twitch* channels. In this last dimension the ethnographic work on the platform itself meant viewing streamers ranging from some of the biggest names on *Twitch* able to command hundreds of thousands of viewers simultaneously, to smaller but still profitable and influential broadcasts bringing in thousands, or “merely” hundreds of spectators. Combining these diverse sources of data has allowed us to get a rich sense of how *Twitch* streamers behave as social media influencers, streamers’ own reflections on this practice, and how the potential for sponsor-driven strategic communication plays out in the everyday of *Twitch* broadcasts.

This article is thereby one analysis emerging from a much larger project studying *Twitch*, its streamers, and its audiences. Our focus has been primarily on the experiences of the most successful live streamers - in this case, those who are most effective and most capable as social media influencers - and their practices and career progression. This article proposes that an important angle for understanding aspirational and successful streamers is by framing them as not just important figures on *Twitch*, but rather elements of larger ecosystems of digital celebrity, sponsorship, and connections to other social media platforms. This perspective allows us to both contribute to the literature on strategic communication as well as that on live streaming, introducing both to the other for the first time, and beginning to build a critical assessment of live streaming and strategic communication as opposed to other social media platforms, websites, and online spaces.

***Twitch* as a social media communication platform**

Although *Twitch* is quite a new entrant into the social media ecosystem, it has developed quickly and begun to mature as a platform on which social media influence, and strategic communication, might be performed. We therefore begin our analysis by addressing the first of our questions: how does *Twitch* operate as a platform for social media influencing, and potentially strategic communication? The answer to this question has not always been what it is now: as Ashley, one of our interview partners, noted about *Twitch*, “it’s got money, it doesn’t feel like it’s by the seam of your pants anymore.” In earlier years the platform was rapidly changing and more challenging to monetise or connect to other social media platforms; now, however, *Twitch* provides “creators” with a platform that, as Simon argued, allows streamers to “be creative in their own style and they can make a living off of it and

change the world and influence others". Simon then used this observation to draw a conclusion about the impact of *Twitch*: "This is not the traditional society we used to live in." The growth means that the practices of streamers are becoming increasingly professionalised. For example, Jennifer explained that their five-year plan on Twitch included having "influence", the "connections to help and get things done", and being able to some extent rest on their "nest egg" while maintaining importance within the *Twitch* community. This means streamers are already framing their streaming activities in terms of influence, in terms of career planning, and how to remain important in the community they have constructed on the platform.

This integration is possible because the platform itself is particularly suited to influencing, due in large part to the core activities of the streamers. As Bill explained, "at the end of the day, Twitch is free advertising. Every single stream, we are advertising that game." By this they mean that merely by the act of broadcasting, a streamer is promoting a game in a different way to reviews or pre-recorded videos, because on *Twitch* viewers can the reciprocal interactions between the streamer and the game – in a format that is *interactive*, much like the game medium itself. This sets Twitch streaming apart from other social media formats, whether video or just image based. Rather than integrating advertising into another activity, for example, a sponsored product review on *YouTube*, the game play is itself already a form of advertising.

From this core activity, it is therefore not much of a leap to begin integrating other and more direct forms of advertising, marketing, and influencing. Bill had advertised specific games for a company by playing them on stream, but was also active in linking the play activity to other forms of promotion: "say there's a scary movie coming out, I'll play a scary game, or I've done

some energy drink promotions.” Neither of these are directly linked to the product – either a movie or a drink – but become integrated into the activities of the streamer. Since many videogames are horror games, and since many gamers are known for consuming energy drinks, these two examples fit easily and comfortably into the expected activities a live streamer might anyway choose to participate in. This means that live streaming has significant potential for products outside of digital games themselves, marketing both to “gamers” specifically, but also to wider demographics of users who are slowly but surely beginning to explore the potential of live-streaming platforms such as *Twitch*.

Sponsorship is not the primary method of earning income on the platform: most successful streamers on *Twitch* make their primary revenue through subscriptions and donations facilitated through the platform architecture, as well as through a range of other monetisation practices (Johnson & Woodcock, In Press). However, many streamers do also pursue sponsorship deals to bring in additional income that might allow them to pursue streaming as a full-time career. These streamers pursue “communication with businesses” at the same time as “getting your name out there”, but this needs to be done in an “organic” way (John) which maintains a sense that the stream has not become a slick, corners-rounded-off, corporate product. In order to function as an influencer on *Twitch* one therefore has “to be noticed by organizers and [be] trustworthy”, explained Jasmine. They saw this an important because we live in “this current world where, obviously, social media is such a big thing”, and thus those with influence over social media platforms have the ability to shape the reception of new products and services. This was a target for some streamers, for example Connor, who explained that, “it’s just a question of growing enough, and getting to the point where I have sponsors and things to help me bring in more of an income.” This could take various forms:

for example, Caitlin had “Nintendo set me up to-, I did a stream for them. So, that was some extra money to help me out”, and Maurice made most of their money from sponsorships: “I have a little niche into mobile gaming, I was one of the innovators which started that. So I've had a lot of opportunities come through that.” They followed this up by adding that “at the moment I depend on sponsorships, I'm full time Twitching now”, making them a *Twitch* streamers whose profitability was centrally based on the ability to offer effective communication opportunities which would appeal to gaming organizations.

For many streamers, analytics also play an important role in building their audience and the popularity of their stream, as well as demonstrating to sponsors that they are someone with sufficient influence to be worth working with. This entails a significant amount of hidden labour which takes place behind the screen, ensuring that the stream is set up correctly, promoted, well timed, and so on (Woodcock & Johnson, In Press). However, the addition of sponsorship meant that some streamers had taken to strongly professionalising their use of data. For example, George explained “if I do sponsor stuff they usually ask for stats but never look at those stats myself”, and similarly Alexa said that, “I don't find myself looking at stats, unless it's a sponsor stream and the sponsors they want to see what those numbers are.” The availability of these kinds of dashboard metrics has aided streamers in finding potential sponsorships. For example, Thomas explained one way that this can work: “So if we go to find sponsors let's say we have a lot of fans in the Philippines or something like that. We go to Filipino companies and look for sponsorship. We say hey, look X amount of Filipino are watching our games. Then we'll obviously try and work to find sponsorship.” This is therefore a context where engagement with stats and analytics is essential for demonstrating the size and value of the crowd one's *Twitch* channel can potentially reach.

This process of connecting streamers to sponsors is also itself becoming professionalised: Terrence told us they “have a management group that gets me sponsored games to stream games for a certain amount of time for a certain price”. The growth of such practices is a result of a situation where so many streamers want “their voice” to be one of the “movers and shakers in the industry, they want to be able to influence people and stuff like that” (Penelope), and streamers were keen to explain that sponsorships were thus a key part of their business plan and strategy. For example, Veronica noted that their background is “very business oriented, very corporate, [and] thinking those things through [was] vital before I decided to take the jump and leave my previous job.” Streamers are now planning their professionalisation activities, what deals are the most beneficial to make, and how to secure a position as a leading figure on the platform. This represents a professionalisation of the strategic communication undertaken by streamers on the platform. Despite the aspirational efforts of streamers and the growth of a secondary ecosystem designed to facilitate the sort of connections described above, *Twitch* remains part of “a very tough industry. It’s very competitive”, as Bill told us. Yet they also stressed the opportunities they had been given through their success on the platform, highlighting again how *Twitch* can open up opportunities for streamers, and what some of the core skills of streaming are:

One thing I’ve done very well is network, I’ve made a lot of good contacts at Twitch and other game companies. If my stream were to be dissolved, I could get a job in the gaming industry, because I’ve been a community manager but doing it myself without any help, that is a skill that so many companies would employ me. Job offers I’ve turned down to work in the game industry.

How can streamers be viable influencers?

While the platform facilitates this kind of communication, as noted in our second question, streamers still need to deploy skills in order to be potentially effective strategic communicators. However, these skills are complicated by the particularities of the gamer community – or rather the many communities which exist around videogames and are more diverse than the “gamer” archetype – mean that influencing viewers is not a straightforward activity. While the interaction on *Twitch* through playing games facilitates influencing as noted above, and streamers work hard to sell their value to companies, the community can also be deeply suspicious or hostile towards overt forms of advertising or marketing. This was expressed in a variety of ways by streamers: “I need to have the right company. It needs to be something that I can actually, like, believe in and back” (Caitlin); “And you do have to worry about, like, what sponsors and stuff think. It hasn’t really affected me in a negative way because I know the line and I don’t have any intention of crossing that or trying to ruin that” (Stella). Similarly, to quote Bill again, they explained that “every time I do [a promotion], I get a lot of negativity with it. [I] think people are more cynical about the film promotions and the energy drink promotions [...] I think some people are like ‘What’s this got do with gaming? Why are you playing this game for this movie?’” So for the streamer that moves from promoting a videogame to another product, this involves a move from doing something that every streamer does (save for some small niche streamers), to something that may be more noticeable as unusual or outside the typical culture of *Twitch*. If streamers are part of gaming culture (and indeed helping to create and shape it), they are expected to be engaged because of their shared love for videogames, not for money changing hands. This is something that Pan (2014) has identified with publicists more generally, that “the idea of performing passion for a wage becomes especially anathema, and the phoniness of PR work is used as a foil for

the more authentic work of the writer or editor.” This shift from endemic to non-endemic sponsorship has historically proven to be a challenging one across different industries, as the issue of “phoniness” becomes more of a problem.

The result is that a lot of work has to be put into ensuring the community accepts both the streamer, *and* any influencing they attempt. Like other forms of influencing and branding (Marwick, 2013), this involves highly skilled forms of emotional and affective labour, ensuring that, in this case, the streamer performs authenticity (Woodcock & Johnson, In Press) without appearing to put in the volume of work they actually do. The difference with other influencing platforms is the specificity of the video game community, bringing additional demands for managing the relationship with brands. In some cases, this is expressed by streamers who stress to their audience that, for example, “my show is just not one that you would need to necessarily prepare for. I have a very easy-going relationship with my community. I am just a normal person and they are all just normal people. We're all just nerds who play video games” (Austin). This belies the significant work required to come across as “normal” and emphasises the importance for streamers of appearing not to take streaming too “seriously”. This is particularly true when then trying to influence the audience in particular ways, about which streamers were very open. For example, Caitlin drew on their previous theatre training, so they said: “I’m always thinking back on any lessons that I was given then, especially from a performance angle, on how to best connect, and best reach”. There are also compromises to be made: Kieran explained that they find it difficult to avoid talking politics, as this was an issue very important to them, and although it is “amazing [to] be myself in chat”, they ultimately felt “I need to treat it like a job” and avoid offending any of their viewers. This

shows us the trade-offs between being an influencer who can potentially secure deals and financial support from sponsors, and being “authentic” in their on-site presentation.

All of this, in a broader sense, is part of the ongoing maturation of influencing on the *Twitch* platform, when we understand the platform as a form of social media. Much like many other industries, as Hazel explained, “companies put their name and brand on everything they can just so that way they can open up the eyes and get a more diverse crowd of people and find just any sense of promotion just so that way their name gets out there. And that's basically what I'm doing.” However, once streamers have been able to successfully integrate advertising and influencing into their stream, there are significant benefits for their own promotion. As Bill explained:

It's about the exposure, endorsement, and the validation it gives me. It's one thing to stream and make money from ... advertising but it's another thing entirely when big game companies want to work with you, when *Twitch* is willing to fly me to America and host for them, when companies like *Nintendo*, *EA*, and *Microsoft* want to work with me, you know I feel like I'm part of the game industry. I don't like some guy who's rough and ready, I feel like I'm part of the game industry now, I feel like I've got a career.

Similarly, once they had made their name (and personal brand) as a streamer, Jordan noted that they were “in a very fortunate position where I can be very picky about what people I work with. So usually it's me finding a product that I like and then we go from there.” This also meant developing more experimental ways of influencing people online: in this case, Jordan was paid by the Swedish government to promote the country abroad on their *Twitch*

channel. This meant interviewing people on stream “and I just brought up the Swedish question every now and again and then it was sponsored by them.” The “Swedish question” was just asking people what they thought about the country, ensuring that the profile was raised with people from other countries. Nevertheless, this influence remains somewhat limited to games and related media; as Penelope stressed, most casters want to stay within the gaming “sphere of influence, because diversifying can mean a dilution of your brand and product” – this is not “what you want” as a broadcaster, and points the direction to understanding the limit of their influencing both as defined by the culture they work within, but also by themselves and popular understandings of streaming practice that circulate within the *Twitch* community.

It is also important to note that these sorts of experiments and successes are not the same between smaller and larger streamers, particularly given how streamers running channels of different sizes are able to interact with their audiences. In smaller streams a broadcaster might have no more than one or two hundred viewers in their channel at any one time, and this means particular sets of technical and social relationships begin to emerge. The “chat” window alongside the channel - which shows what viewers have to say - will move at a sufficiently slow speed that a streamer can realistically expect to read every message they get sent, reply to them, and build a sense of community. For many viewers streamers of these size are rewarding precisely because they can be guaranteed regular attention from the streamer, while the competition for their attention is sufficiently low. In this regard we can see clear benefits for strategic communication through streamers for smaller streamers who were likely to have more intimate relationships with their viewers than those who watch

larger channels. However, it is almost entirely larger channels where streamers are able to secure partnerships with sponsors, and function most effectively as influencers.

Streamers with larger audiences are unable to respond directly to all questions, comments, or interact quite as directly with their viewers as smaller streamers. However, there are many benefits to outweigh this difference. As Betsy noted, “a lot of the bigger streams will have a team” to help them produce content, but smaller streamers “like me can’t afford it [laughs] – we’d be poor! So we do a lot of it ourselves”. This means large streamers are able to spend more time producing content because they can recruit others to do some of the work for them. Kieran explained that as one’s stream grows, “you just have to get bigger and better and really treat it as a business”, and getting in the “mindset” of “an entrepreneur”. Only at a large stream size do these concerns of having an entire team to support a streamer, and treating it like a business, become relevant. As such, the question of streamer size for their effectiveness as social media influencers seems to come down to a trade-off between close relationships with a small number, and semi-close relationships with a large number. Given the streamers pursued most actively by business interests, it is clear that reaching a larger crowd is considered more valuable than a smaller crowd (who might consider themselves “closer” to the streamer), and our research seems to bear this out: a channel with ten times the viewers does not seem to offer viewers only one tenth of the closeness to the streamer.

However, smaller streamers still remain valuable as potential influencers. This is because *Twitch* itself has begun to offer assistance to smaller streamers looking to break into this kind of market, and grow their channels accordingly. There are similarities here to the emergence of “micro-celebrities” on other platforms (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016). On *Twitch*, one element of microcelebrity can be found with the testing and introduction of the new “Bounty

Board Program” by *Twitch* (2018b). These are essentially short, gamified influencer contracts between a streamer, *Twitch*, and a brand. For example, a brand could post a bounty for a streamer to play a particular game for an hour, with a required average concurrent viewer count, various conditions, and a set maximum payout. This brings many of the risks that gamification can entail (Woodcock & Johnson, 2018). These bounties require the streamer to put “sponsored” in the title, a practice not widely shared across influencing programs on different platforms. While these kinds of sponsored streams are being beta tested at present, there are also plans for “bounties that involve watching branded videos live with your community.” What this shows is the potential for smaller streamers to be powerful influencers, albeit on a scale and payment much smaller than the more high-profile larger streamers. This is consequently a move towards a far more granular and localised form of influencing, and the ability for a greater number of streamers to perform strategic communication roles. The Bounty Board opens up possibilities for streamers to facilitate sponsored communication, and in doing so allows smaller influencers to have an effect which is not always apparent on other comparable social media platforms.

The challenges of strategic communication and influencing on *Twitch* is therefore not just about reaching the largest number of “eyes”, but involves negotiating challenges to balance authenticity and money, finance and culture, all while keeping an audience engaged during the growth and development of a channel. The factors identified for effective influencing on *Twitch* are listed in Table 1 below.

Factors	Examples
Authenticity	The cultural context in which streamers operate puts significant pressure on them to

	perform in ways that are considered “authentic”, which can undermine paid influencing attempts. Attempts to “sell” a product can be rejected by the audience.
Community management	The two-way communication between streamer and audience has to be balanced effectively with active moderation.
Relationship management with brand	Streamers need to effectively manage the relationship with the brand, ensuring that the communication taking part in their channel remains in line with their expectations.
Method of communication	Product placement is only one form of influencing that streamers can undertake. Experiments with new methods, particularly those that use the affordances of the platform, are proving effective.
Size of audience	There are different examples of strategies that can be used by streamers with large and small audiences, each with their own pressures and opportunities.

Table 1: Effective influencing on *Twitch*

To conclude these points, we finish with the words of Jordan, who summed up many of the tensions on the platform which aspiring streamers must negotiate. Although few are as explicit about their concerns over these practices as this respondent was, this nevertheless makes clear the potential tension between the culture of gaming authenticity, and the culture of aspirational professionalisation:

And I think it's generally good, it's just a sign that people have their eyes on this community and people wanna get in on it, that's good. Now it's up us, the streamers and the viewers to make sure that we harness this opportunity in a good way and not milk it for cash because I think one of the biggest strength of our community is not

that we're growing in number, it's that we still have our, let's call them morals and ideals intact. You're proud to be a gamer still and you like what gaming stands for.

Making sense of Twitch as strategic communication

Given the above, there are now two elements we want to draw particular attention to in terms of how *Twitch* operates as a strategic communication platform, and where potential future research in this area might go. First, pursuing greater precision regarding what elements of *Twitch* in particular make it effective communication for organisations. Second, drawing further attention to the high levels of entrepreneurial and creative skills that influencers draw upon. Each of these is an important dimension of the relationships evolving between streamers, the platform, and brands, and each highlights some of the complexities of these emerging communication relationships on *Twitch*.

To begin this part of the analysis, we therefore ask: what specifically is it about *Twitch* that makes streamers effective strategic communicators, and how does this differ from other platforms? As we have already noted, all of the internet's major social media platforms have become exemplary sites for strategic communication activities by companies and other professional bodies, as well as sites for individuals to emerge as social media influencers. Within this context we propose from our above data that there are two related elements which are particularly central to *Twitch's* effectiveness in this area compared to other comparable platforms: the fact that all broadcasts and interactions with influencers are *live*, and the ability to hold direct *conversations* with these streamers. This live aspect creates affordances of closeness between the audience (as individual and collective) and the streamer; this means that the streamer must seek to foster authenticity in various ways to

build a close community, ensuring that the relationship with the audience is two-way and reciprocal. Taking on opinions from the audience remains an important part of the process, rather than only seeking to put forward the streamers opinions (and therefore influence). *Twitch* is therefore well-positioned to become a major channel for social media influencers, and its distinctive combination of liveness and proximity are key components of its growing success in this area. Strategic communication as a field would consequently do well to reflect on the effectiveness of these particular constellations of social and technical elements, and how developments in internet technology are enabling this new kind of media influencing.

To emphasize this point, we think it important to also stress that alongside facilitating the actions of other organisations, platforms like *Twitch* have become powerful brands *in their own right* (Linke & Zerfass, 2012) as a result of these same processes. They do not serve to simply convey strategic communication in an entirely neutral manner from a company to a viewer, but the cultural values and brand loyalty associated with the platform itself transforms them, helps this process, and in turn is helped by this process. In this way a live streaming platform simultaneously generates its own legitimacy through its ability to convey branding messages from major brands, while also adding something to the strategic communication on the basis of the perceived value or trustworthiness of the platform itself. That *Twitch* is worth communicating on is a function, in part, of its own pedigree for communication and engagement.

Following on from this, we also believe it important to emphasise the centrality of the entrepreneurial and creative skills successful streamers draw on. In more traditional media it is still entirely acceptable for a “Sponsored By” message to be attached to a particular item or broadcast, and this will air the presence of the sponsor to the relevant crowd. However, a

new media platform created by primarily “amateur” content-creators, who trade in large part of authenticity and a sense of genuine connection to gaming culture, is not a site on which that traditional message (or its similar equivalents) will work. As such, different methods are used by streamers who wish to function as influencers, and these require different kinds of creative and entrepreneurial work. As well as naturally securing sponsors, there is an interesting balance - which merits further research - that must be maintained before influencing can be strategically effective. As we have seen, streamers believe that effective influencing requires the practices to be framed in particular ways that are acceptable to their audience, deploying creative approaches to sponsored streams, and communicative labour to ensure viewers are reassured about the relationships between streamers and the games they play. Equally, if a streamer was sponsored to play a certain game, and panned it on stream - would that games company ever again sponsor that streamer? Yet it is the presentation of authenticity and genuine opinions that streamers promise to their audiences, and numerous streamers (and also creators on *YouTube*) have found themselves having to negotiate challenging relationships between the financial and cultural requirements of their work, which do not necessarily align. Strategic communication on *Twitch* therefore requires creativity and labour on the part of the *streamer* far more than the *brand*, to a greater extent than most other social media platforms.

This study of *Twitch* also has importance for communication more broadly, outside of the examination of strategic communication possibilities on live streaming platforms. Given the value of personalised communication (Paul, 2011), it is clear that the close relationship (however we define it) between streamers and viewers is a highly effective route of communication. As noted earlier in the paper, *communication* is inevitably the core of

strategic communication (van Ruler, 2018), and live streaming enables communication to large, new, highly-engaged audiences, bringing with it new *strategic* possibilities. When a streamer promotes a given sponsor (cf. van Ruler, 2018, p. 372), both the streamer and the sponsor benefit. The interplay between the play of a game or the use of some other product, the comments of the streamer, and the communication between the streamer and the viewers, has proven effective for disseminating the objectives or interests of the sponsor(s) in question (cf. Hallahan et al, 2007). Similarly, the potential for a “continuous loop” (van Ruler, 2018, p. 367) of rapidly-tested communication efforts are extremely high on *Twitch*: the live nature of the platform and the possibility for rapid qualitative (*Twitch* chat) and quantitative (statistics and data) feedback has significant potential. Lastly, to return to Werder et al’s (2018) list of relevant disciplines that factor into strategic communication, we can see a number of these being affected or even potentially transformed by live streaming. Public relations efforts of many game developers and other bodies are starting to use live streaming to directly reach viewers via already-popular streaming celebrities; the branding of many games now takes account of how they will look on a live stream, and we expect other products to gradually begin following this trend as reputation management by many celebrities involves live streaming. As live streaming moves further away from a core focus on digital gaming into many other domains, we expect its impacts on strategic communication to only expand in variety, and grow in importance.

Conclusion

Despite a growing awareness of the value of social media to strategic communication, “there is considerable uncertainty on how to employ these tools from a strategic perspective” (Lewis,

2009:10). To help shed some light on how this might be done, with this paper we have sought to understand the role of *Twitch* live streamers as social media influencers, and their potential value to organizations carrying out strategic communication activities. We hope to have demonstrated that influencing on *Twitch* is a multileveled and complex phenomenon that has grown alongside the platform. The instances of influencing are shaped by the closeness of the audience and streamer, as well as the demands for authenticity that are notable within the game-oriented communities. In particular, we have highlighted that *Twitch* is maturing as a platform, and can no longer be seen as just an emerging or experimental space, and certainly not as a niche one, given the number of people who produce and consume content on its channels. This can be clearly seen with the developed of practices that relate to finding and matching sponsors, maintaining authenticity within the community, and rearticulating these processes through the affordances of the platform. The result is that through the *Twitch* platform streamers are profoundly reshaping the videogames industry in multiple ways as it becomes a central channel for communication - both of the games themselves but also of the wider commodification of the culture.

As such, we believe the contribution of this paper is twofold. First, this is the first thorough and empirically grounded analysis of influencing and strategic communication on the *Twitch* platform. Utilising over one hundred semi-structured interviews accompanied by our ethnographic observations, we have been able to draw these analytical perspectives to bear on an important contemporary phenomenon. While the live-streaming of videogame play over the internet may have seemed like a relatively obscure phenomenon five years ago, it has now become a mainstream and important media channel for over a hundred million people and two million streamers, and shows no signs of ceasing to grow. While there are

broad categorisations that can be made within that figure - for example, the celebrity streamers, partners, affiliates, streamers with very low/no viewers, and so on - the different dynamics of influencing and strategic communication across these are manifold. It is likely we have only begun to see how social media influencing on the platform can function, and we suspect techniques and practices effective on *Twitch* will soon begin to expand onto other sites and into other contexts.

In particular, the combination of data-driven sponsorship, and emotional engagement, has potential impact far outside of *Twitch*. As Thackeray, Neiger, Smith, & Van Wagenen (2012) note, agencies wishing to use social media effectively must have a strategic communication plan in place to do so, and one which both “incorporates best practices for expanding reach” while also “fostering interactivity and engagement”. It is this combination – the hard technical specifics of maximising the number of users reached, combined with the intimacy and affect of building *engagement* rather than just passive consumption – which makes it so potentially impactful. In this way the goal is “not only to inform consumers, but also engage them by involving them into company decisions, [and] creating a sense of exclusivity for consumers who partake in social media” (Long, 2011, p. 145). The interest of consumers on *Twitch* and their feedback on new games has the ability to reach game developers (Johnson & Woodcock, 2018) and in some cases influence design, while “review copies” of games or other media offered to streamers before release give a feeling of special treatment for viewers in those channels. This point, the sense of exclusivity, is especially important to understand when we consider a *live* social media entertainment phenomenon like *Twitch*: although videos can be watched long after they are broadcast, the majority of viewers tune in and want to tune in when a broadcast is live. Such a live broadcast is immediate, urgent, the broadcaster and the

viewer are both simultaneously present in the same media experience, co-creating it and building a sense that this stream – and whatever strategic communication content it contains – is special, distinctive, and meaningful. The “live-ness” is certainly central to *Twitch*’s effectiveness, and what makes it distinct from sites such as *YouTube*, and this is an element important to consider in future research.

Finally, what this research begins to point toward - particularly through the frequent discussion by our participants of the notion of authenticity - is that the influence of a streamer cannot simply be calculated by the size of their audience. Although it is clear that a celebrity streamer holds an impressive sway of (potential) influence over their large audience, smaller streamers can also be influential in much more direct ways with a smaller audience. In turn, the platform itself has begun to develop new methods for streamers of all sizes to begin to serve as influencers, and aid the strategic communication goals of potential partners, which is a move that few if any other social media platforms have yet explored. What this highlights is the need to further unpack the dynamics of influencing across a range of different streamer types, as well as developing a more robust typology and understanding of what kinds of streamers are present on the *Twitch* platform. While the concept of micro-celebrity has previously pointed towards this phenomenon, the *Twitch* platform provides a key example of how this operates and different levels and intensities, both with smaller and larger streamers. Through the range of techniques outlined here organizations are pursuing new forms of strategic communication on *Twitch*, which merits our attention as a core element of how social media influencers are increasingly important to the marketing agendas of many organisations. On *Twitch* aspiring streamers take an active role in developing themselves as influencers, and in doing so, increase the reach of their partners: what remains to be seen is

how this brand-streamer-platform constellation will evolve, and how its effectiveness will weigh up against influencers on other comparable sites.

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