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**Exploring the Elements of Success in Online Gameplay Streaming on Twitch.tv Through
the Lens of a Streamer**

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Abstract

What constitutes success in online gameplay streaming, and how does one achieve this?

My research seeks to answer this question through a qualitative research inquiry underpinned by an autoethnographic study of my own participant observation - as an online gameplay streamer - between March 2021 and November 2021. During this time, I positioned myself as a streamer on Twitch.tv with the intention to identify key elements of success in online streaming as a creative business. As a researcher-participant, I have since analysed my own experiences; I offer here a first-person critique of my journey through the research question. Within this work, I propose a niche in the research field, through a framework for streaming success, identified in terms of *Streamer Health, Community Health, and Financial Health*.

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Exploring the Elements of Success in Online Gameplay Streaming on Twitch.tv Through the Lens of a Streamer

Using the persona, *Zanthres*¹, I embodied the role of a streamer on the online gameplay platform, Twitch.tv², and actively engaged with a growing community of gamers, between March 2021 to November 2021. My key objective was to position myself as research subject³ within a highly interactive online environment⁴, to ascertain key features of “success”⁵ within gameplay streaming as a creative business. Through autoethnographic participant observation, I have kept a record of my encounters and discoveries while immersed in the streamer role. Through this exegesis, I critique my streaming experience as a researcher-participant. Sharing insight to the creative processes I experienced, I incorporate first person narrative with ideas from relevant academic literature. My intention is to bridge the gap between academic literature and creative inquiry (Montuori, 2005) to create a more intimate encounter with the findings of my research.

This thesis responds to the three main components of my Master of Creative Enterprise (MCE) as they relate to my research experience: (1) *The creative project*: Delivered in two parts, this includes (a) 21 minute .mp4 audio-video compilation of streams during the fieldwork period (March 2021 to November 2021) in chronological order, which showcases the evolution of the persona ‘Zanthres’; and (b) a “brand design” pamphlet for Zanthres, which highlights the

¹ I developed this pseudonym from the alteration of the name *Zanthros*

² <https://www.twitch.tv/>

³ “[R]esearchers and authors need to place themselves and their work firmly in a relational context. We cannot be separated from our work, nor should our writing be separated from ourselves (i.e., we must write in the first person rather than the third)” (Wilson, 2007, p. 194).

⁴ The volume, transience/mobility, and anonymity of community participants necessitated a research focus on myself as subject, rather than others, such that written research consent from community members was not necessary: ie. I was the primary participant in the research, while online community members represented an ever-changing data field.

⁵ *Streamer Health, Community Health, and Financial Health*

stylistic choices/features that helped to establish my streamer identity and contribute to the channel's capacity to "stand out" from the competition. (2) *The business plan*: This overviews the business development and financial elements that I encountered through the research period, highlights milestones, with statistics and future projections considered. And (3) *The exegesis*: Discussing the research methodology and literature review arising from the research experience of the creative project and business plan, this essay presents the proposed framework for success in online streaming.

Success Framework

Within the context of streaming online gameplay, the success framework that I propose consists of three categories: Financial Health, Community Health, and Streamer Health. Through my readings and direct research experience, I define Good Financial Health as having steady avenues of income (through streaming), that provide a profit after expenses are deducted, equate to more opportunities, and open the possibility for streaming to become a full-time occupation if desired. The Business Plan reflects the Financial Health of my research period. I define Community Health as the frequency in which the streamer's community engages with the streamer and each other, through multiple communication channels, such as live chat during streaming, or in the streamer's tailored social media channels. Community Health can be described as a measurement of the activity during the interaction of the parasocial relationship. I define Streamer Health as the mental and physical wellbeing of the streamer when they partake in the action of broadcasting - before, during, and after. In this essay, I focus on an in-depth analysis on how Streamer Health is important to online success, focusing on my own experiences with(in) my community, whether/how and why those interactions correlate(d) to a better streaming experience, and whether/how and why certain behaviours and/or rules may enhance

confidence, growth, and performance in the streamer. In my literature review, I bring forth an introduction into the creative environment of a streamer by first establishing factors of consideration such as entrepreneurship, networking, the parasocial⁶ interaction between the streamer and their audience, gamification, and statistical research/interviews to translate into trends of success. The results and discussion section of this essay considers my personal experience within the start up of streaming, the parasocial relationship dynamic of online gameplay streaming with reflection, and a case study.

Researcher Positioning Statement

Born and raised in New Zealand, I identify as a female Chinese New Zealander. At the time of writing, I am currently 25, studying a MCE. I was introduced to computer games and books from the age of 1. This led to an avid interest in gaming. Now, I consider myself a gamer; but more specifically, I specialise in the genre, MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game).

I undertook this research to investigate and establish a template for earning income that I could continue to develop after I graduate. Undertaking my research during the height of COVID-19 spurred me on to explore elements for success in streaming, to not only earn income, but also establish connections in a familiar environment during lockdowns and isolation. Well known in the gaming community, Twitch.tv provided an ideal platform for me to pursue my financial and social aims within the context of creative research. My first interaction with Twitch was in 2016. While the platform originally started with purely gameplay, it has since diversified into other categories such as IRL (In Real Life), Music, Esports, and Creative. Iqbal (2022) reports a 69% increase in hours watched by viewers from 2019 to 2020, and there was a 31%

⁶ One-sided relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956)

increase in viewer population from 2020 to 2021. Similarly, the active streamer populace doubled from 2019 to 2020, and 2021 showed another 31% increase. With quarantines across the globe resulting in limited social contact, COVID-19 led many people to online environments for social interaction - this presented a compelling opportunity for me to start streaming.



Figure 1: Streaming categories available on Twitch.tv (Source: Twitch.tv)

Background

As an experienced gamer, the information and resources I have at my disposal ensured a strong foundation upon which to commence my participatory observation research; my gaming knowledge and resources also differentiate(d) me from many other streamers.⁷ My gaming history comprises decades of interaction with other gamers through MMORPGs, and connections made with peers through gaming social media, such as Steam and Discord. While Steam doubles as an online game store, Discord allows users to instantly communicate through voice, video, files, and text, in community servers (“Discord,” n.d.), Twitch, and in the MMORPGs themselves. I typically interact with players/users of similar age to me. As such, my online peers are in my target audience and market, which gives me insight to my viewership. I am a high volume consumer of Twitch and the website’s gamification properties,⁸ and am therefore well versed in navigating the site from a viewer perspective. Additionally, I achieved *Affiliate* status on Twitch.tv prior to commencing my participatory research in March 2021. Affiliate status is appointed after reaching fifty followers on the channel; it unlocks the possibility to establish a

⁷ This observation is based on anecdotal evidence derived from conversations with my peers.

⁸ According to Deterding et al. (2011), gamification is defined as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (p. 9).

contract between the streamer and Twitch (the company), which opens the opportunity to earn money through live streaming on the platform.

Methodology

My research question asks: *What constitutes success in online gameplay streaming and how does one achieve this?* To answer this question, I undertook a qualitative inquiry that used participant observation and autoethnography to place myself within the research as the central subject – an online gameplay streamer. Documenting and reflecting upon my experiences during the streaming period, I sourced data on the development of my brand, *Zanthres*, the online persona, interactions with audience, and (specifically) the consequences I encountered through creation of parasocial relationship(s) with(in) my community and the wider environment of Twitch.tv. As such, I became an experiential witness to emerging factors for success in streaming as a full-time career.

Central to my research methodology is *participant observation*, “a method of collecting qualitative data in social research” that “involves the immersion of the researcher in the subject matter so that it can be observed in its natural setting” (UKEssays, 2018). As a research method, participant observation involves the researcher within a continuum of direct engagement that ranges “from passive (observation) to active (participation)” (UKEssays, 2018). Within the context of my own research, my participation involved all the requirements to set up streaming, going through the motions of following a schedule, my interactions and behaviour on stream, and the offline duties of communication with my followers. The observational component of my method was focused on self-observation; I recorded, monitored and evaluated my own actions (as the central subject of the study). My method then synthesised my findings through *reflective journaling* and *autoethnographic analysis*. As a narrative method, autoethnography allows me to

identify the personal story that unfolded through my research - how my choices and actions, in response to my online interactions and behaviours, benefits my ‘streaming success’.

Rather than collecting and analysing data on other people, speculating and judging the significance of their behaviours, I collected and analysed data arising from my own direct experience. I am my subject. While other people engaged with my streaming activities, I did not seek consent for their participation in the research, given the volume of participants, transient nature of engagement, anonymity within the online community, and the fact that all live streams on Twitch.tv are public by default; consent is implicit within participation in the platform. For the purpose of my exegesis, however, usernames have been redacted to ensure privacy and respect for any moments in the interaction between streamer and viewer, reflected upon and shared here.

My active research commenced in early 2021, when I prepared the equipment needed for streaming, practised and broadcasted streams, and identified my emerging brand. The software I used during brand design were Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator. For streaming, I used Streamlabs OBS (Open Broadcasting Software). Minor program integrations were also set up; these included connections to Paypal, Twitter, Twitch integrated widgets, and BetterTTV, which is a “third-party browser extension that allows viewers to use (additional) emotes and animated spots in Twitch chat” (Lele, 2021). The hardware I used during streaming included an ASUS ROG Strix G15 laptop connected to a monitor, a Blue Yeti Microphone attached to a Rode PSA 1 boom stand, a shock mount for the microphone, a Nintendo Switch, an Elgato Capture Card, a Logitech StreamCam, mouse and keyboard, and lamps for lighting.

Research fieldwork occurred during a nine-month schedule of live-streaming, starting March 2021 and completing November 2021. During this time, I sustained regular

moderate-intensity⁹ activity online. In the beginning, I prototyped the schedule to strategically position which days I preferred. This resulted in a succinct schedule: every week, I would stream on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday starting at 7:00pm NZT, for four hours each session.

Literature Review

In this literature review, I first explore the challenges of entry to and sustainability within the creative industry through Baker and Hesmondhalgh (2009), and link this to the creative individual experience. Then, I pull focus to the streaming environment, and bridge the gap between streaming and entrepreneurship. This leads to an exploration of the parasocial relationship that intertwines with gamification. Then there is a consideration of interviews and data collection done by other researchers to determine persona and brand trends in streaming success.

In the paper, *'A very complicated version of freedom': Conditions and experiences of creative labour in three cultural industries'*, Baker and Hesmondhalgh (2009) share insights to perspectives of a creative working in the media industry. They prioritise the emotional responses and reactions of workers in three major lines of department in the creative industry: television, recording, and magazine. Through interviewing the participants, Baker and Hesmondhalgh (2009) found general agreement toward a negative perspective and dissatisfaction with fairness and policy surrounding the environment of respect, freedom, and autonomy. They also find people in the creative sector tend to hold multiple jobs, and that "success" is partly dependent on being self-employed or being freelance; the consequence of this is working with short term contracts, little job protection, unequal earnings, and high competition (p. 17). Concurring with these observations, Menger (2006) defines artistic labour market(s) in terms of imperfect

⁹ A minimum of 12 hours per week across three days.

monopolistic competition, characterised by “excess supply of labor, unbounded differentiation of production, reputational rents, a population of small firms that has been growing as fast as the number of artists” (p. 766). Further, Menger (2006) describes artists and creative technical workers as “contingent workers, freelancers and independent contractors” operating in a marketplace where “labor supply is patterned by repeated and discontinuous alternations between work and unemployment” (p.766). Consequently, “workers cycle between multiple jobs inside and outside the arts” (p. 766).

Within these conditions, independence is forced upon the creative practitioner to be “successful” in a highly competitive environment; consequently, it could be argued that the capacity to “succeed” in creative industry (including live streaming) is influenced by the extent to which the practitioner identifies (and activates their identity) as an entrepreneur. To this end, Kirkley (2016) cites Giddens’ (1991) statement on self-identity being “the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography” whereupon “identity is not found in one’s behaviour or in the reactions of others, but rather in their ability to continue a narrative” (pp. 53-54). Kirkley (2016) believes that one cannot use entrepreneurship as just a label. Rather, it requires the person to truly believe they are entrepreneurial and express those beliefs through their behaviour (p. 292). According to Kirkley (2016), entrepreneurs have certain attributes that define them as such: networker, creative, ambitious, independent, goal driven, and achiever (p. 306).

Given Kirkley’s observations of entrepreneurship, it could be argued that if the creative practitioner is to identify an entrepreneur, they may need to cultivate and/or harness social skills, including networking. Blair (2001) describes entry into the UK film industry as highly dependent on our connections, and work is very involved in societal management and interpersonal

relationships. Baker and Hesmondhalgh (2009) argue that creatives who are less socially inclined are more likely to encounter difficulties, given socialising and networking are essential building blocks for success in the creative industry. Numerous writers concur on this point, including Janasz and Forret (2008) who state that “one’s willingness and comfort with networking can significantly impact one’s ability to establish contacts, get interviews for jobs, and identify and cultivate mentors” (p. 629). This in mind, it seems the ability to network effectively is “crucial for career and personal success” (p. 629). Forret and Dougherty (2001) also state that self-esteem, extraversion, and attitude are major traits to be considered for networking success.

While networking and building relationships is considered by some researchers to be crucial to success in the creative industry, the environment of online gameplay streaming leans toward a different mode of social contact - that is to say, the parasocial relationship. Horton and Wohl (1956) define a parasocial interaction as an “one-sided, non dialectical” interaction “controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development” (p. 215). Dibble et al. (2016), however, differentiates between parasocial interaction and a parasocial relationship, stating that interaction is “restricted to the viewing episode”, while the parasocial relationship extends beyond that period. Kowert and Daniel (2021) defines a traditional parasocial relationship as one where “a person extends emotional energy, interest, and time in the relationship while the other person, the media figure, is unaware of the other’s existence” (p. 1). That said, Kowert and Daniel (2021) challenges the traditional definition of parasocial relationships to promote a different definition, one specific to the “streamer-to-viewer” relationship. Because of all the ways in which a Twitch.tv streamer can respond and communicate with their viewers, reciprocation occurs in real-time; according to Kowert and

Daniel (2021), this is not a traditional parasocial relationship, but rather, a “*one-and-half sided parasocial relationship*” (p. 2).

McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) theorise a “sense of community” that correlates with the Kowert and Daniel (2021) definition of parasocial relationship within the streaming environment. McMillan and Chavis (1986) identify four main elements within a sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Within a streaming environment, membership can (from my own experience) feel akin to personal relatability and the sense of shared similarities with others. Influence feels like (again, from my own experience) a sense that one matters, that there is an important role to play, and that one is perceived as having the ability to make a difference. Integration and fulfilment of needs within the streaming environment, I equate to knowing that one’s needs as a viewer will be met by the streamer, or the streamer’s community, as a consequence of membership to that community. This is a space of shared emotional connection, a sense of belonging, as if part of a team, where communication is open, and trust is established, like feeling part of a “family”. I would argue that all these elements apply within the streaming environment. Indeed, when a streamer’s investment in the audience is reciprocated by the audience to the streamer, in ways that encourage a better streaming performance and audience experience, I would argue that this reflects the Kowert and Daniel (2021) definition of a streamer’s ‘*one-and-half sided parasocial relationship*.’

Within a streaming environment, what might be the psychological effects of the parasocial relationship? Li et al. (2020) investigate the experiences of streamers and viewers to determine whether there is a link between live streaming games and different psychological effects, specifically, internet addiction. Li et al. (2020) cite 24 different sources to conclude that

participant behaviours (streamer and viewers) were most affected by “user demands and platform impact”. (p. 12).

For streamers, social integration, personal integration, affective and additional rewards should be fully considered. For audiences, attention should be paid to affecting factors such as social integration, personal integration, tension release, affective demand, and cognition, and game category. Of these, social and affective demands are the more important impact factors for both streamers and audiences. (pp. 12-13)

Even though gameplay enticed viewers, it was the sense of being part of a community, alongside a streamer’s engagement with viewers, that ultimately made audience members stay. (Li et al. 2020, p. 13) Through my research, I believe the persona of the streamer can cause internet addiction, if the streamer engages and fulfils both their audience and their own “social and affective demands” (p. 13)

Li et al. (2020) proposes the streaming sites themselves need to be analysed, in terms of gamification, brand attractiveness, and digitalisation, to confirm whether these factors contribute to addictive behaviours (of streamer and/or viewer) to live streaming gameplay. Through a case study of YouNow, a platform that offers a social live streaming service, Scheibe (2018) looks at how gamification affects all participants in question (streamer and audience). The results showed that the streamers themselves were motivated due to being on a platform that supports the growth of an audience. This connects with my own research, given growth of an audience is a key goal for a streamer interested in building Community Health. Gamification can highly motivate viewers, supporting their involvement in the streamer’s community, by positively giving them ‘instant’ gratification within a platform, such as winning mini games with virtual coins, or having a top ranking system, where viewers are more inclined to donate and support the

streamer, to climb the ranks. If gamification is attributed to internet addiction due to ‘instant’ gratification processes, is this detrimental to the health of the viewer and the streamer, or does it bolster the parasocial relationship between both parties and provide a more fulfilling experience? The ‘one-and-half sided parasocial relationship’ proposed by Kowert and Daniel. (2021) would be more inclined to side with the benefits of having a better sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) through the gamification of Twitch.tv. However, I believe Li et al (2020) proposes an interesting perspective on the possible negative effects of gamification if consumption is high.

Kaytoue et al. (2012) give an analysis of Twitch audiences, sorts through data about viewer counts, audience, and durations, and shares perspectives of audience members and other streamers. This allows Kaytoue et al. (2012) to predict audience characteristics relevant to a stream brand, rank most popular players, and predict how audience-brand synergies tie into their success. Surprisingly, early predictions of stream popularity have proved quite accurate; average stream views today positively correlate to early predictions of viewership numbers. According to Kaytoue et al. (2012), this data may be used to foretell success for a streamer. For instance, E-Sport events and releases inadvertently promote the wider experience of watching simultaneous live streaming gameplays. As the data from Kaytoue et al. (2012) shows, when viewership count increases over multiple different games, “raiding culture”¹⁰ results in an increase in sustained viewership across the entire Twitch platform. This reflects another way to cultivate exposure. In terms of monetising viewership, Gros et al. (2017) found that the average viewer count at the time of spectating and the average live amount of time a pre-existing audience watches a stream impacted whether viewers would support the streamer monetarily. Popularity and growth are a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the more popular a streamer is in

¹⁰ “An active streamer automatically redirect(s) their currently live audience over to another live Twitch streamer’s page, instantly boosting the other streamer’s viewership and flooding their chat with new users” (Houghton, 2021).

terms of visible statistics on the website, the more viewers are attracted to the stream, and therefore the greater the likelihood of financial gain.

In the paper, '*Understanding Characteristics of Popular Streamers on Live Streaming Platforms: Evidence from Twitch.tv*', Zhao et al. (2019) aim to establish characteristics of popular streamer personalities through "mapping streamer-centred characteristics to the viewers' motives" (p. 1077). They collected data from 544 randomly selected Twitch streamers and used vocal audio software to extract personality traits from the audio transcripts. They also used facial detection software for the video data to see if a webcam changed the popularity of the streamer. Then they cross-mapped the data from gaming streams with the *Just Chatting* category, and it remained "consistent in terms of the personality traits and social affordance" (p. 1078). Interestingly, their results found there is a particular personality that does very well in streaming: "The personality of popular streamers can be described as low in openness, high in conscientiousness, and high in neuroticism" (p. 1078) and "viewers prefer to watch streamers who are focused, unconventional, and emotionally sensitive" (p. 1090).

Zhao et al. (2019) believe these characteristics provide and satisfy the viewer's curious tendencies and boredom. Just like Li et al. (2020) describes the streamers' persona being the deciding factor in whether a viewer stays and becomes part of the community, Zhao et al. (2019) stress the importance of using a camera and therefore establishing a better connection and speaking to the audience as vital factors in distinguishing streamers with more potential for success (p. 1090). This is also supported by Hamilton et al. (2014) who indicates viewers like to relate to and see the emotions and the facial expressions of the streamer (p. 1321).

The essential factors for success in creative fields apply to the success of an online gameplay streamer. Entrepreneurship qualities such as networking, are given support through the

gamification of the streaming site. However, there are tailored experiences that only streamers encounter such as the one-and-a-half parasocial relationship. Both streamer and viewer constantly engage with the gamification of the streaming site. Gamification bolsters the frequency of interaction which can be interpreted as bolstering Community Health, though, through the analysis of the parasocial relationship, I conclude the streaming persona has a much bigger influence on streaming success, which is supported by the data collection and the interview analysis by Kaytoue et al. (2012) and Zhao et al. (2019). I summarise the streaming persona heavily defines the individuality of the stream, and I explore my own journey of developing a persona as a streamer in my active participation research.

Results & Discussion

During my fieldwork as an online streamer, between March 2021 to November 2021, I maintained a journal of my processes, milestones, observations and insights. In this section, I bridge the key learnings from the literature review with highlights from my participatory observation. Through Results & Discussion, I describe the beginning of Twitch and how I set up my workstation and the considerations I made to incorporate my personal values into a brand. This involves the evolution of the brand and the critical thinking I implicate. Then, I discuss bullying and moderation, the parasocial relationship from the perspective of the streamer, ending on a case study of Daniel Howell, who is a successful Youtuber with correlation and integration of my own experiences.

The Beginning: Applications and Starting out on Twitch.tv

Streamlabs, which was my main application for streaming, doubled as a website that integrated with Twitch.tv. Streamlabs and other broadcasting software like OBS (Open Broadcasting Studio) connect to Twitch.tv through a unique code, which then allows

personalisation of the stream through scene designs and scene transitions in the software. Then, the 'Go Live' button on Streamlabs starts broadcasting the tailored stream to Twitch.tv, with real-time chat integration.

Photoshop was used to create the badges, emotes, and logo designs. Illustrator was used to create a prototype logo design using vectors, which unfortunately was not launched by the end of the streaming period.

Having a camera was essential to my brand and success. Zhao et al. (2019) shows that streamers who have cameras bring in a bigger audience, and being a very emotive person, it really helped me to connect with my viewers, and aligned brand values, in particular, the value of feeling part of a family. A profile picture that defines the stream content was used to establish a connection with the content I produce on the streams, invoking a more intimate relationship.

I designed a mascot for my brand, which helped develop my brand easier as a newcomer to streaming. The mascot is a bao bun, commonly eaten in east-asian cultures, that has a savoury or a sweet-filling, wrapped in fluffy dough, which can be steamed, microwaved, or pan-fried. Bao buns can be eaten for breakfast, lunch, dinner, or as a snack, and I feel the bun resonated with my brand. The physical aspects of the bao bun represent me - soft and fluffy, all-rounded, invoked cuteness, and being of "asian cuisine".

I engaged with elements of gamification of Twitch.tv to find the latest trend of add-ons and widget usage throughout all categories on Twitch that encouraged active audience participation and helped bridge the connection gap between streamer and viewer.

I developed a journal, titled "The Book of Zan" which I used to document interactions with my viewers during the stream. I took notes on what they shared in terms of their individuality, experiences, and their recommendations to me. In this, I managed to make sure I

developed a feeling of care, importance and belonging for my viewers, so that my viewers feel comfortable and cared for and I establish a closer relationship with them. I also used The Book of Zant to individualise greetings to past viewers when they pop back into the streams. Hamilton et al. (2014) states “greeting individual viewers is an activity that can be seen on most streams of a reasonably small size. As discussed before, being greeted is greatly appreciated by many viewers. It is an important part of some stream communities” (p. 1320). This method helped to sustain repeat viewership, and therefore Community Health. Slowly, but surely, I built a fanbase, which I named the ZantFam, an abbreviation for the Zanthres Family. Care and friendliness are very important values to me, and so these were integrated into my persona and brand.

My first gameplay stream was WoW (World of Warcraft), and in the beginning, I was more focused on the gameplay, rather than interaction with the audience. I was shy, and timid, and there were not a lot of viewers chatting during the stream. Looking back, I believe that having viewers to chat with during a stream enabled interesting talking points; this helped to shape my interaction with viewers, how I set up my streams, and ultimately how my persona evolved from nervousness and hesitant, to carefree and aloof. This progression is spectated in the video in the Creative Project section of this thesis.

Searching to establish a community, I looked into games with established fanbases. I started to brainstorm what games to play. I developed a desire to stream a multitude of games, and which by definition, to brand myself as a variety streamer. First, I thought of games that I had a history of, such as Warframe, Black Desert Online, and Pokemon games. Through the process of streaming, I found sharing knowledge was the most comfortable way for me to stream, so I incorporated this into my brand.

I streamed a multitude of different games and throughout, I would discuss information and tactics with my viewers - WoW, Monster Hunter Rise, Indie Games, Resident Evil 7 & 8, and by the end of the research period, Black Desert Online. I was a half-variety streamer, where my main game was BDO, with one day during the streaming period dedicated to horror games, other genres, or IRL. My viewers were my team, and they partook on the adventures with me, working together. Sometimes I streamed Art, and I found playing simplified games that a broad spectrum of viewers could interact and relate with such as Hangman, sparked a lot of conversation and active participation in the chat. Monster Hunter Rise formulated the beginning of the ZanFam community, and from then on, live viewers started to steadily climb. Monster Hunter Rise was successful because the game had elements of inclusion; both the streamer and viewer can play together in a team. I would cycle viewers in and out to allow every viewer who was eager to have a turn.

Another turning point was when I streamed gameplay of Resident Evil 7, a first-person horror RPG. The loud sound redemptions that Twitch widgets allow, let the viewers directly invoke a reaction out of me while I was in a highly nervous situation in the game. The streams could be described as “pure, unadulterated Zan” where I expressed genuine reactions and the viewers could feel the terror in my voice. This supports why the relationship between a streamer and a viewer can be considered a half-parasocial relationship because not only can the viewer directly communicate in real-time through chat, but through the gamification of the streaming platform through widgets, sparking immediate responses and actions that the streamer notices. (Kowert & Daniel, 2021).

Increasingly more games have partnership programs such as BDO, like Naraka:Bladepoint and New World that reward the streamer (in game) for being a streamer.

There is no limitation to streaming specifically on Twitch.tv, but the game itself may have a partnership with a broadcasting site that could propel the streamer through free marketing avenues. These are mutually beneficial marketing strategies which would benefit the networking entrepreneurial aspect of being a Twitch streamer.

Settling on one game helped bring focus and define your audience due to the nature of the Twitch search engine, which helps to develop a faster community and average viewership. The engine focuses on the game category, rather than the brand name. Of course, one could type in the search bar for the username of the streamer, however, the website is not efficient in showcasing what the streamer's content is, compared to Youtube. Therefore, this was the best method to develop a community and increase your live viewers on Twitch.tv. This was something I also encountered. However, a common problem that streamers experience is they can get stuck (and branded, stereotypically) to one game; this makes it difficult to branch out. I would recommend if one wants to be a variety streamer, to utilise streaming on Youtube, or, stream on Twitch.tv and edit and upload those videos to Youtube, as the foundations of Youtube are better suited to reach a broad populace, rather than Twitch.tv, where games are used as the main search tool and other streamers are recommended to the viewer through being a similar game streamer. My method was to stream something entirely different at least once per week. This technique enabled a broader reach, and avoided the Zan brand being perceived as just being a single-game streamer.

In the height of my streaming period, I found much success in terms of viewership and engagement through Black Desert Online. I chose this game as my main game because I had history, knowledge, and a plethora of connections through multiple channels which I could call upon and advertise my streams to. Black Desert Online also had a partnership program, where

streamers were recognised by the developers through in-game achievements and titles, and streams were promoted on the main gaming site, through newsletters and launchers.

During my streaming period, I networked. However, instead of reaching out to other streamers through conversation, I reached out through action. This action was utilising the method of “raiding” other streamers, where once a streamer finishes their streaming session, they can bring their audience to another streamer. This is a friendly and professional way to introduce and establish a relationship between streamers. Blair (2001) states that networking is very important to success in the creative industry. This ties into my own experience with being very open and eager to establish new connections and friendships with other streamers who have a very similar brand and similar principles to mine. Baker and Hesmondhalgh (2009) also describe that because socialising and networking are an integral part of the building blocks of success in the creative industry, people who are not inclined to socialise, will struggle more than people who do. As a consequence of my experience throughout my creative project, I would add that knowledge of the platform is essential to utilise the tools specific to the workplace in order to establish networks more efficiently and thoroughly. For instance, a critical success moment for me was through a raid by BladeNZ, a New Zealand streamer with approximately 3,600 followers. On the 23rd of August he raided my stream after I raided his earlier, which introduced me into the community of streamers who specialised in streaming Black Desert Online (BDO), such as Sampson, Choice, and other brand streamers who followed me. I experienced a huge spike in viewership - from 30 on average to 235, which then stabilised to around 85 - 95 viewers. My active participation affected my Community Health by increasing traffic and awareness, and this affected my Financial Health because I received a spike in subscriptions and donations.

Reflecting back, I would not have had this experience if I did not constantly engage in the Twitch raiding culture.

Persona in terms of Brand

The persona of Zanthres is central to the brand; it is essential to a fulfilling and engaging experience for the audience. While Zanthres can be described as a persona for streaming, it is the result of my own “performance”, an illusion of acting; however, I would challenge the notion of it as pure illusion by saying that I am Zanthres, and Zanthres is me. There are occasions where I exaggerate performances a little bit more than is necessary, but I find streaming allows me to truly embody and express myself as a person. There is authenticity in my performance.

The purpose of performance, however, reaches beyond a need for personal expression. Wohn and Freeman (2020) assert, for instance, that Twitch “content creators also have to cultivate, track, manage, engage, and satisfy diverse audiences” as a means to identify audiences accurately and thereby “adjust their performance” accordingly (pp. 106-107). I started to exaggerate my responses as my streams progressed, but with a more carefree attitude, intertwining me, as Jing, where I would normally be more nervous, to me, as Zanthres, where Zanthres engages with the audience and brings in a performance. I believe Zanthres helps me better myself as Jing, and through streaming, I went through a self-reflective process of who I am.

When I began streaming for my creative project, I focused more on the gameplay and tried to provide my viewers entertainment via demonstration of skill. I lacked confidence and was shy on camera. However, over time, I became more confident as I partook in all the nuances of streaming, such as welcoming new followers, thanking donors and subscribers, hyping up the viewers for an event, and talking constantly to the camera. I started to (perhaps subconsciously)

act as an entertainer. In doing so, I experienced what Wohn and Freeman (2020) describe (citing multiple sources): that “people who stream do so with a performative element” (p. 107).

Streaming through performance can be exhausting creative work. There were times when I wanted to give up, I was so tired; but I established the mental power and commitment to sustain one stream per stream day. This commitment to streaming gave me a sense of accomplishment and pride. Though it sometimes felt like a grind, I kept going. I would re-watch my streams, take notes for improvement, and develop strategies to be more engaging, efficient, interactive, and entertaining. For instance, I discovered that constant communication and/or emotive expression encouraged an engaging stream. At times, when viewers were scarce, and chatters were low, I developed the trait of constantly “talking to myself”. When I realised that “rambling” was something my audience enjoyed, I would pick random topics or events as conversation starters, and share my thoughts. This was an important strategy I used to engage my viewers.

Swearing on stream in a public forum was something I was hesitant to do at first. I tried to stay “family-friendly” at first, but over time, I realised two things: (1) that was not who I truly was, and (2) it had a negative impact on the quality of my streams and audience engagement, because my reactions were not genuine. Grappling with the question of whether to use profanity allowed me to discover more about who I really wanted to be on stream. First, however, I needed to understand more about who I am off-stream, in my daily life. This called for a reflective process, which enabled me to deepen my self-awareness, and build a healthier relationship with myself. I discovered that, as I deepened into my streaming journey, my everyday self and my persona became exaggerated expressions of what I might call my “true self”. Being in a parasocial environment provided an apparent buffer to (immediate) judgement. I could freely represent myself on stream without sudden interruptions or immediate disdain. While this did not

eliminate criticism, it afforded a delay that allowed me to be present in the moment, and act without hesitating for fear of immediate reprisal.

Genuine behaviour is very important in establishing trust. Positioning myself from the viewer perspective, observing other streamers, I could tell – from their micro-expressions when other streamers were “faking” their emotions or having a truly good time with their viewers. The value of trust is very important in establishing relationships and streamer popularity (Zhao et al., 2019, p. 1982). This in mind, and to go back to an earlier point, being genuine through the persona of Zanthres means I incorporated swearing as part of my character brand.

A healthy online community is important to the viewer and streamer. I believe that “like attracts like”. In sharing my values with my streaming community – through expressions such as, “failure is just a stepping stone to success”, or “being part of my community is being part of the ZanFam”, or “all past grievances are dismissed and we start anew together as a team” - I related to my viewers with increasing ease. By defining who I am on stream, I defined my audience. I believe this is very important, because in terms of mental health, it has prevented significant harassment, cyber bullying, and other extreme uncomfortable situations such as gender discrimination. Surprisingly, I rarely received hate for my gender and race in chat. Influence, integration, and fulfilment of needs go hand in hand for me. I strived to engage my viewers in elements of active participation, such as spontaneous polls, in which viewers can use their channel points to vote whether action A or B will happen in the next few seconds, or invited my audience members to participate in the gameplay with me, on stream. A few times I would bring viewers into a Discord call, and I would engage in gameplay and talk to them. This bridged the gap of the lack of emotional connection and dissociation that came with the parasocial relationship between streamer and viewer, further strengthening my bond with my community, as

I went through the realisation that they were people like me, dissolving the anonymity, which lead me to respect my viewers more.

Bullying and Moderation

Moderators are trusted individuals in a streamer's community who are assigned the role and responsibility of maintaining order during live streams. They have a toolkit of commands and actions that can control chatters by timing or banning them if they behave improperly. Moderation was an integral part of having a safe stream for the streamer and viewers alike; a good moderation team equals a better experience for all. My moderation team consisted of five people who I played BDO with and understood the gaming culture. Gaming culture is defined by Spacey (2019) as "the set of customs, symbols, traditions and norms that have emerged around the shared experience of video games."

While streaming within my research period, I encountered bullying such as remarks that did not come off as constructive criticism. Rather, of dissatisfaction, such as 'you sound bad' or 'you suck' or demeaning of character, through two principal channels: within chat during live-streaming, and within Discord (the social-media platform for the ZanFam). A viewer donated money through PayPal, then critiqued the quality of the stream, and myself as the streamer, within the live chat. While I was initially startled, I decided to respond. In the paper '*Audience Management Practices of Live Streamers on Twitch*', Wohn and Freeman (2020) assert that "dealing with trolls" is "an important aspect of audience management" (p. 110). This was especially important for me, as a female, in a live streaming platform, where, the environmental context raises valid concerns around gender-discrimination and harassment (Lorenz & Browning, 2020).

My response to bullying took different forms. Importantly, I tested rules of engagement, and established a three-strike system for viewer participation in my stream. If I encountered direct bullying while streaming, I typically brushed the comment off or ignored it altogether. Ignoring the comment generally avoided escalation, as any attention to the ‘troll’ would fuel their harassment. I developed the mentality of not caring as much and not taking as much offence on stream, due to the volatile nature of anonymity on the internet. Nearing the end of the streaming period I warned the chatters who breached the stream’s code of conduct, and called upon my moderators to ban or time them out. Given my care for the ZanFam community experience within my streams, I established a three-strike system to ensure a healthy environment ongoing. This three-strike system is enforced in Discord, and only referenced to in-stream. One of my principles, clearly communicated with viewers through my stream, is respect. In this regard, I advocated respect for everyone’s opinions because everybody has different upbringings, lifestyles, and values. It is not for me to impose my beliefs on others if they do not wish to hear it. I believe the three-strike system accorded with this principle, enforced by my moderators, who were present both in stream and Discord.

Early on, I discovered the potential disconnect between verbal and nonverbal communication that could occur between a streamer and their viewers, the chatters. I experienced this as a spectator when I made a joke with a streamer who, because they could not see my body language or read my tone, from the spectator perspective, misinterpreted my communication, and took the joke very seriously. This disconnect between two parties is a potential consequence of the ‘half-parasocial relationship’. In the example above, I attempted to solve the problem (as the viewer) by being literal in my expression and adding in parenthesis (joke) as relevant. Conversely, when I adopted the role of streamer, I would play around the

remark and see if the viewer would elaborate further; I would take a casual, approachable stance, or express empathy if I interpreted it as a sad topic. Often, the viewer would indeed elaborate. If not, I would let the topic go and start rambling about something else. I was also aware of potential culture clashes or misinterpretations from an international audience; yet another reason for incorporating the value of respect within my brand.

Exploring the Para-social Relationship

Baker and Hesmondhalgh (2009) claim that even though self-employment introduces freedom in a creative individual's life, this blurs the distinction between pleasure and obligation and may cause anxiety in individuals. From my experience, my heart rate increased prior to streaming, then eventually slowed during and after streaming. During streams, I may experience certain levels of anxiety; the thought that my every action is being watched, judged, critiqued, can cause numbness and sweat. My desire to provide my audience with a good experience and to entertain them to the best of my ability, resulted in the desire to be "perfect" on stream, which gave me anxious tendencies. Menger (2006) also comments that "learning by doing plays such a decisive role that in many artforms initial training is an imperfect filtering device". As such, the [working] artist moulds their unique thinking processes around the demands itself, and they are often thrown into instances of the unknown that require their own ability to cater to the situation (p. 765). This could explain anxious tendencies in creative individuals as a negative consequence, however as a benefit, the parasocial communication gap in the streaming context, as an exaggerated example, removed from my field of vision the two hundred pairs of eyes that represented two hundred viewers. Being unable to "see" my audience helped me, as the streamer, to develop greater confidence, and thereby react and behave more genuinely with my viewers.

Baker and Hesmondhalgh (2009) question what constitutes a positive, healthy working environment for creatives. If self-independence, leading to autonomy and pleasure, can be construed as a tool for control, the risk of exploitation may become a concern. Gjestang (2020) argues that “audience demands promote extra workload, poor work-life balance and a complete loss of autonomy” (p. 2). This is something to which I can relate. Self-regulating to stream to a timetable, I often felt as if I was being forced to stream in order to meet my own principles. While I was in command of myself, striving to succeed in the formation of a strong community and viewer-base, I effectively became a “tool”, a “cog” in the streaming machine. I experienced moments of disassociation, where I began to see myself as a brand, a persona, and I feared that my personal values might change if I inadvertently “sold myself” for financial success.

Case Study

Daniel Howell is a Youtuber with a follower count of 6.23 million as of writing this paper. In a video he released May 5th, 2022, titled *‘Why I Quit Youtube’*, Howell presents a personal account of his experiences as a content creator. I recognise parallels between our online experiences. Howell discusses his experiences from his beginnings to now, and raises questions around the negative evolution of content creators based on their audience demands and the streaming environment. “No matter how much you tell yourself this is what you’re doing and why, and you’re sticking to your guns, you can’t help but notice what resonates with people.” Surprisingly, streaming has made me more in tune with who I am, and supported the feeling of being independent and appreciated. However, Howell states, “when you start to create what you think the followers will want, you think no one wants the real you...and if you don’t keep them happy, they will come with the pitchforks.” While I have not been streaming as long as Howell, I recognise a shared fear of chasing financial stability at the cost of my own integrity. What is my

price? Do I have a price? These questions in mind, I believe it is crucial to sustain a strong, stable personality, to believe in oneself and creative practice, to prevent a downward spiral of self-doubt in the face of public critique and judgement.

Howell also mentions “negativity bias”, and that every content creator will (to a lesser or greater extent) encounter trolling. He suggests that, while it may be tempting to obsess over a single negative comment in a sea of praise, this is not healthy, and content creators should embrace the people enjoying their content. This connects with one of my streaming principles: “you can’t please everyone”. If a streamer already has a community, then they are on the (developing) path to success. Howell compares an audience base to an iceberg in water, in relief and humbleness. The frosty tip comprises the people who exclaim and remark, but the majority of one’s audience is “just silently vibing” beneath the surface.

Howell believes everyone experiences para-social relationships. However, there are certain challenges confronting an online content creator. From the perspective of the content creator, the parasocial relationship may push one to express too much personal information, to the point of a performer to entertain, and not a person. According to Howell (2022):

How much do you open up? Are you just there to do your job, and give people content, or is your Twitter for saying what’s really on your mind, your Instagram showing where you are and what you’re up to, is a vlog a creative video blog, or is it a literal video of your day and you are the star of your own digital reality show? What’s the line between sharing funny stories and sharing your real relationships? Getting people invested in the story of your life like a soap opera so then when life changes for you, the audience is angry that you’ve ruined their favourite T.V show. The journey of your channel isn’t about growing your creative style, it’s playing the game of life in public. You want some

hit content? Get married! Have kids, get a dog, do life, do it right now as hard and as fast as you can till your feet set on fire and we all laugh spectacularly when it burns to the ground.

While Howell acknowledges this as dramatic, it highlights the mental turmoil of a content creator. Howell (2022) states that, as a content creator, “just do you”, and accept that one cannot please everyone all the time. The video goes on to talk about other integral points of a creative’s life, such as COVID-19, which set back future plans, and invited a constant struggle to be in the limelight, and not forgotten. Howell believes Youtube uses him as a tool rather than consider him as a human being. As Baker and Hesmondhalgh (2009) explain, creatives can be easily “thrown about” and shown less respect due to the competitive nature of contracted work. Howell’s video ends reflectively, with Howell commenting about his continued evolution as a content creator, “shining brighter” and performing better, as a consequence of his challenges and experiences. In this way, Howell’s observations align with my own to reflect the need to develop confidence, belief in one’s self, faith in one’s actions, and commitment to the pursuit of creative health – through community-building, financial gain, and the importance of self-care.

Limitations of Study

My results and discussion are limited in context and I would like to make this aware. This research is from a female perspective, where I allude to potential differences in experiences. However, this is not covered in depth in this reflection. My past experiences and knowledge in connections and personal interactions with peers within my target audience contributes to a closer pre-established connection within Twitch.tv, which is not described in depth. By the end of my active streaming research period, I had only amassed around 400~ followers, which gives an indication of the limited interaction I experienced. Perhaps having someone who will engage in

active research for a longer period of time and record their growth, would give a better indication of what the top end streamers experience, if the researcher achieves comparable statistics. As mentioned by Hamilton et al. (2014), the experience between beginner and top end streamers differ (p. 1316). I focus primarily on gameplay streaming within my research and so only a generalisation of my framework can be applied to other categories such as IRL and E-Sports. The framework for success is built on my experiences. There are a plethora of factors that one can dissect to formulate success, and I must add although this framework works for me, it may not work for everyone. It is for this reason, that this framework be more suited as a guideline to be mindful of, rather than an exact road map - to increase the likelihood of success.

Conclusion

This research is an expression of curiosity, and a documentation of self-discovery and self-growth. The experience is unique and ultimately the streaming process will differ for every streamer, as brand and content heavily correlate to personality and preferences. It holds merit to take a step back and analyse the streams for quick and concise improvement. Moving forward, my biggest realisation is to enjoy the process as a content creator. There will be trials and tribulations experienced in any career choice, and it is exciting to embody the opportunity created by the internet which did not exist twenty years ago. Persona and visual brand have a direct correlation, and the effects of a parasocial relationship and the consequences of gamification should hold value in terms of how one 'performs' on stream. Ultimately, I believe this is not the end of the learning period, and the framework which I propose, Financial Health, Streamer Health and Community Health, can be further improved on. I add my experiences to the academic field as a case study, and hope this information provides useful insight into the processes and the mind of a budding Twitch streamer.

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