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Working as a Twitch Content Creator:

Preliminary Results from a Qualitative Interview Study

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Introduction

Billions of people watch and enjoy user-generated content on online platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, or Twitch every month. Online content creation has become a significant cultural, economic, and political force in modern societies, yet we know little about the people creating the content and their everyday experiences. We conducted interviews with 30 content creators on the live streaming platform Twitch.tv to address this gap. Twitch.tv (owned by Amazon) is currently the largest public live streaming platform, with about 2.87 million concurrent viewers and 111,000 concurrent channels in 2021 (twitchtracker.com). Our interviews included questions on how creators got into live streaming, how they went about building and managing their communities, how creators make a living, how they felt about the platform Twitch, and how creators navigated the pandemic and their well-being. Below we provide the first summary of our findings. *We want to thank you - the content creators who participated in this study - for sharing your experiences with us and making this study possible!*

How did we go about collecting our data?

Our intent with this study was to speak with live streaming content creators who spend at least a part-time job's worth of time streaming. Specifically, this meant creators who were streaming at least 10 hours per week on average. We limited our search to creators over the age of 18 in the United States and accounts that had at least 90 days of activity. Our final sample included 30 content creators, 11 women, and 19 men, and 43% identified as Hispanic, Black, Asian, Native American, or multi-racial. Moreover, 63% of our sample were Twitch Partners at the time of the interview. For an overview of our interviewees, please see the table below.

Pseudonym	Gender	Race / Ethnicity	Genre	Twitch Partner?	Followers
Elliot	Man	Black	Variety	Yes	25-50k
Edward	Man	Black	Variety	Yes	50k+
Aaron	Man	Black	Variety	No	0-10k
Levi	Man	Hispanic	Variety	Yes	0-10k
Steven	Man	Hispanic	League of Legends	No	0-10k
Marcus	Man	Multi-Racial	Variety	Yes	25-50k
Chris	Man	White	Food/Drink	No	0-10k
Wilson	Man	White	Variety	No	0-10k
Eric	Man	White	Pokémon	Yes	25-50k
Jeremy	Man	White	Variety	Yes	25-50k
Ozzy	Man	White	Variety	Yes	10-25k
Johnathan	Man	White	Music	Yes	0-10k
Tim	Man	White	Variety	No	0-10k
Frank	Man	White	Variety	Yes	50k+
Peyton	Man	White	Art	Yes	50k+
Patrick	Man	White	Strategy	No	0-10k
Nick	Man	White	Variety	Yes	50k+
Oliver	Man	White	Warzone	Yes	50k+
Lukas & Juliette	Man & Woman	White	Music	No	50k+
Amanda	Woman	Asian	Variety	No	0-10k
Sierra	Woman	Asian	Variety	Yes	25-50k
Emma	Woman	Asian	Just Chatting	Yes	10-25k
Sarah	Woman	Hispanic	Variety	No	0-10k
Lizzy	Woman	Hispanic	Variety	No	0-10k
Lola	Woman	Multi-Racial	FPS	Yes	0-10k
Quinn	Woman	Native American	Variety	No	0-10k
Evelynn	Woman	White	Variety	Yes	10-25k
Felicia	Woman	White	Variety	Yes	10-25k
Suzy	Woman	White	Variety	Yes	25-50k
Irene	Woman	White	Variety	Yes	50k+

We identified creators by randomly picking live accounts from the ten largest categories

(e.g., Just Chatting, Valorant, Music, etc.) on Twitch. After randomly selecting a category, we

filtered the category to include 'English' tags and sorted viewers high to low. We then randomly

picked live accounts. We verified that the accounts met our criteria using Sullygnome.com and

Twitchtracker.com, and then sent recruitment messages via social media and email.

Interviews took place over Zoom and were recorded with the consent of the participants.

These interviews took place over three waves: Summer 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021.

Multiple team members conducted these interviews, including Dr. Anne-Kathrin Kronberg and

her graduate student assistants, Jordan Duran and Leah Bourque. We transcribed the audio from

the recordings to text and used a qualitative coding process to systematically identify patterns

and themes in the interviews. The findings we present below are an overview of the most

prominent patterns and themes across the interviews. We also include some patterns that we

believe you, as a content creator, will find interesting or enlightening.

The Road into Professional Streaming

First, we asked streamers about their general career transition into streaming. This involved

questions regarding jobs held beforehand, reasons to start streaming, and more.

➢ *What were creators doing before streaming on Twitch?*

Most streamers we interviewed held other jobs before streaming full or part-time. About one-

third of the interviewees were students at the start of their streaming career or prior. There was

an equal number of streamers either in college or high school when they began streaming. About

a quarter of creators held jobs and/or degrees in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and

Math) such as data science, IT, programming, or game development. Another quarter of

interviewees held jobs in the service industry including restaurant work, factory/warehouse jobs,

or retail, often while also going to school. Edwards says "*when I started off [streaming], as I said, I was in high school. [...] I started working at a grocery store.*" Many content creators mentioned feeling dissatisfied with their jobs and were looking for creative outlets. And lastly, several streamers had careers as content creators or entertainers on platforms other than Twitch, including a few who were in the film/tv industry.

➤ *What attracted creators to streaming?*

Many factors attracted people into streaming, including a prior love for gaming, influence from others, the desire to connect with people, and dissatisfaction in their previous jobs. An overwhelming majority of the streamers were prior gamers themselves. Amanda recounts her love for gaming *"I'm an avid gamer already anyway. I had a high-end PC to play modern games. So, I was like, well, why not?"* Another finding was that most creators went into live streaming because they were introduced to it through friends, family, colleagues at work, or by their viewers on other platforms (such as YouTube), which is expressed by Peyton who says: "*so I had heard about streaming from a ... Kind of like a distant friend told me about it, just mentioned it.*"

Additionally, about half of content creators got into streaming because they were making content on other platforms as a hobby and an overwhelming majority started by creating content for YouTube. About a third of interviewees said they were attracted to streaming because they could use the platform to connect with others. For instance, Steven explains the social aspects *"[I] talk, I like to meet people. So, for this, this is my thing, and I like to make people laugh."* Many creators talked about the enjoyment they feel from getting to entertain and make people happy, as well as getting immediate feedback, which is often not possible to get on platforms such as YouTube. Sierra expresses her enjoyment for real-time interactions:

> *"[B]efore Twitch, I was uploading music covers and things on YouTube, but there wasn't that real-time feel to it. Because with Twitch, you have a chat there with people just responding to you in real time. And every time you do something, you get that kind of reaction. And that's a lot of fun and that's really exciting to me"* - Sierra.

➤ *When did streaming move from a hobby to a career?*

Most creators we interviewed stream as their full-time job. There were two major themes regarding when the streamers felt their streaming went from a hobby to a career. A turning point for many was a steady stream of revenue. Many creators talked about how they decided to do streaming full time when they began making enough money to support themselves. For instance, Frank summarizes "*I got one of the largest paychecks I'd gotten and I was like, 'I can pay rent with this.' And I was like, 'Okay, this is something that I can continue to do'.*"
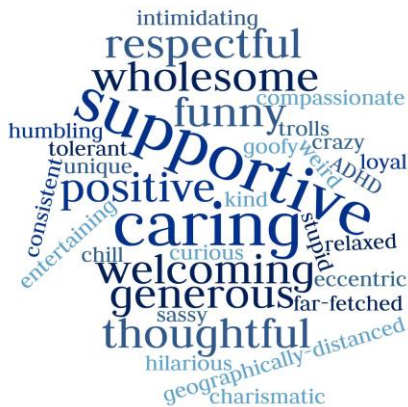
Another very big theme was that many saw streaming as a serious career when they gained popularity. For example, Eric said, "*I waited until my following was big enough that I could support myself going full-time to make the switch for sure.*" The definition of popularity differed from streamer to streamer, with some creators noting that their careers began when they gained followers in the double digits, while others saw this hobby to career transition happening when they gained hundreds or even thousands of followers.

Interactions with Creators' Community and Toxic Viewers

In the next section, we asked streamers about their community and audience. This includes how streamers feel about their community, and potential toxic viewers.

The word cloud to the left shows how creators described their community. Most thought of their community as "supportive", "caring", "positive", and "wholesome". Beyond these key attributes, content creators chose words that describe the energetic nature of their community (e.g., sassy, eccentric, far-fetched) or words that expressed a mocking but playful relationship between creators and their communities (e.g., trolls, stupid).

➢ *How did content creators grow their communities?*

When content creators talked about growing their audience three major themes emerged. (Note: These themes describe what people did, not necessarily what worked.) First, growing one's stream was an intentional effort. Many creators described a process akin to marketing and promoting their brand. By far the most important tool for promoting their Twitch channel was cross-platform promotion. For instance, Tim explains that other platforms are his primary way of recruiting new viewers "*I think the most sustainable way is to have a niche on a platform like YouTube or TikTok and promote your concept.*"

The second most common theme focused on the content itself. About half of content creators emphasized that social media is what attracts new viewers, but engaging content and a consistent streaming schedule is what keeps viewers. For instance, Jeremy explains how important it is to provide consistent content: "*A lot of it is just keeping the attention of people, making content that's worthwhile enough and just getting that consistency.*" A few content creators also discussed gaining visibility by being exceptional at their craft, for example, by scoring very high on leaderboards or creating art that is widely appreciated.

The third most common theme addresses the social aspect. A little less than half of the interviewees discussed building strong relationships with their viewers or being part of a community of content creators that promoted and raided each other. For instance, Patrick discussed being part of a streaming collective "*I'm on the [name of streaming group] which is 35 of us and we share a lot of our communities.*"

➢ *What are creators' experiences with toxic viewers?*

While creators generally had a very positive experience with their (regular) audience, some also discussed more disruptive viewers. When we asked about toxic comments, some clear patterns emerged: Creators of color and women faced more racist and sexist remarks.

Almost all women discussed receiving unwanted sexual attention, which includes obscene graphics in chat (Amanda) or chat comments including "*Wow you are sexy*" (Lola), "*Show me your feet*" (Felicia), "*Show your boobs*" (Evelynn), "*if you unbutton your shirt, I'll give you money*" (Suzy), or more explicit threats of sexual violence (Juliette, Irene). More toxic comments suggested women had no place on the platform and were using their bodies or femininity to "steal" viewers. Women of color were particularly targeted with objectifying language, for instance, Sarah describes an exchange with her viewers: *"[Viewer:] 'She's going to get fiery. Fiery Latina. She's so spicy.' And I'm like, 'What are these weird words? These words that we connect to Hispanic female identity'?"* We want to note that men also received unwanted sexual attention, such as viewers repeatedly stating they are masturbating while watching the stream (Steven). All men describing these interactions were men of color.

Creators of color all described receiving racial slurs in their chat. Some discussed the trade-off between hiding their racial identity but having a larger audience versus revealing their

identity and "*shine light on issues that people like me face*" (Marcus) but becoming confined to a

smaller niche of "*black content*" (Edward). Aaron recounts losing viewers:

> "*[I] turn on my webcam, right? All the people started joining in. I don't see three fourths of those people anymore because once they found out I was Black they were like, "Nah, we can't mess with you no more." I was like, "You was cool with me for nine months and now that I'm turning my webcam on you don't like me because I'm Black, like what?"*" -
> Aaron

➤ *What helps content creators deal with toxic viewers?*

Creators made it overwhelmingly clear that moderation tools represented the first line of

defense against toxic viewers. Regardless of channel size, all creators discussed having

automated bots that can block specific terms and phrases. All creators also made use of

temporary time-outs or permanent bans. Almost all midsize to large channels had volunteer

moderators who discipline toxic viewers during live streams. In many instances, creators also

described their community as a protective layer that would address misbehavior or provide

emotional support to streamers. More broadly, good moderation tools are essential to creators'

experiences. However, current tools also have limits, for instance when their stream becomes the

target of a hate raid, which is a sudden, massive influx of viewers or automated bots.

To keep toxic comments from affecting their mental health, creators often consciously

reframed toxic comments by reminding themselves of the big picture. For instance, Quinn sees

negative comments in a broader context: "[…] *I understand that most negative comments come

from something personal that the person is going through.*" The previous example shows that

reframing the comments often meant that creators actively engaged with viewers, where

appropriate. This included educating viewers on why their comments are offensive or drawing

boundaries around what behavior is acceptable.

> *"So you have to keep reminding yourself that there's boundaries between you and your audience and that just because you can help some people doesn't mean that you should, or that you're capable of helping everyone, and also setting that precedent set you up to be like a target in the future" - Lizzy*

Finally, Twitch guidelines and policies were only of limited help. Many creators welcomed policies that clearly defined and banned sexual content, setting Twitch apart from other content websites that permit sexual content. At the same time, several streamers found dress codes and guidelines off-putting. In some instances, sexual content policies were weaponized by viewers, who felt women did not belong on the platform. For instance, Felicia expresses her frustration "*I was streaming one day and it just got shut down, they [Twitch] said that I was soliciting nudity or sexual goods on my channel, which was not true. [...] I think I was a victim of botting, either a massive amount of trolls reported me or a bot came through and just banned me.*"

Well-being and Streaming during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Next, we asked streamers how they manage their well-being on stream, how COVID-19 has affected their stream and their general mental health.

➢ *What are creators' experiences with stress and mental health?*

Most of the streamers we interviewed either had or are currently suffering from a mental health issue. Depression was the most common mental health issue. Many streamers that previously had depression are doing better now, for example, Elliot said:

> *"I'm doing a bit better. There was a time where I was in a pretty bad spot, but like I said, my community, they've been very, very helpful with making sure that I'm okay. Then health and stuff comes first before trying to push and stream as much as you can. They've been very helpful. Now I'm doing a bit better now, mentally and financially" - Elliot*

Unfortunately, some are still suffering mental health issues:

> *"A lot of it is mainly due to me coping with the depression of everything that's happening. But the depression has left me very immobile for the past couple of weeks. I've had a lot of musicians and drummers and people come in and support me and my stream and things like that and that's ... I'm very grateful and very thankful for those moments. It certainly improves my mood"* - Jonathan

About a quarter of creators expresses feeling explicitly happy and content with their life, because they had the opportunity to stream regularly:

> *"Yeah, once I made the decision [to start streaming], I was much, much happier. I found the work actually to be really fulfilling, which I wasn't anticipating. I had anticipated that I would enjoy it and that'd be fun, but I didn't expect it to be fulfilling in a way that it actually has been for me. I think, mostly my main point of conflict was before the decision was made."* - Eric

Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety have increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Depression and anxiety are most common among teenagers (age 12-19) and young adults (age 18-29), with about 21% of young adults reporting symptoms of depression (Source: CDC https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db379.htm)

If you or someone you know struggles with mental health, we encourage you to reach out to a local professional. Additionally, here are a few online sources for help: Checkpointorg.com is a mental health resource specifically for gamers. Betterhelp.com and talkspace.com are online therapy forums. For more immediate help in moments of emotional distress, please call the 24-7 National Suicide Hotline (800-273-8255) to connect with a local crisis center for free and confidential help.

➢ *How did content creators maintain their wellbeing?*

Streaming poses many challenges to well-being, both physical and mental. The overwhelming majority of streamers said that taking breaks was essential for preserving their

well-being. Some of these breaks are scheduled, as Aaron says: *"Sometimes I'll just stream two days and take three days off."* Additionally, about half of the interviewees discussed how important community support and friendships are. Tim says that when exercising physical care or breaks: *"Stresses like that at the very beginning to now have gotten a lot better because my social circle is more surrounded with people who do what I do or they know about what I do."* Other themes that came up were enacting general physical care or being honest with the audience about their well-being.

➢ *How did the Covid-19 Pandemic affect streaming?*

The pandemic has posed challenges for many people. For content creators, however, COVID-19 mostly had a positive effect and often came with a spike in viewership. For example, Wilson said: *"I would say that it [pandemic] has allowed people a better chance to come view the stream, to come by. [...] like I keep tabs on some of those statistics and stuff. Not just my channel, but of Twitch as a whole."* Another common theme is that creators themselves were unaffected by the lockdowns and social distancing. For instance, Sierra explains that she was already working from home when the lockdowns began and therefore her everyday routine remained the same: *"in terms of streaming [...] It [the pandemic] hasn't affected it that much because we stream from home anyway. And now that there's the pandemic, it's still the same thing."* Overall, in the world of streaming, Covid-19 had limited if not positive effects on viewership and daily routines. However, COVID-19 has made it more difficult for creators to disconnect or spend offline time with friends and family.

Earning a Living, Views on Twitch, and Perspectives on Influence

Finally, we asked about how creators make a living on or off Twitch, how they manage viewership, perspectives of Twitch, and government policies regarding streaming.

➤ *Earning a Living - Promoting Monetization*

We identified a pattern that bringing up subscriptions or monetary contributions with viewers was a tricky subject. For example, Elliot explained *"I'm too timid with it. [My mods and friends are] like, "Dude, just say it just to say it. Just say, 'Hey guys, we're 50 away from 200 subs or 2000 subs or whatever.'" I'm like, "I don't want to feel like I'm begging."* Sarah highlighted the awkwardness of asking. *"I don't want to be like, "Hey guys, did you re-subscribe today? Blah, blah, blah, blah." I'm too awkward about it. I don't like asking."*

We found several themes pertaining to why pushing monetizing was an uncomfortable topic. Especially among our first interviews, it seemed that creators were quite careful to bring up money during the peak of job losses in the pandemic (we conducted our first interviews in Summer 2020). As Chris put it, *"Take care of you before you take care of us. Everyone's feeling the pinch, but don't put yourself in a bad way just to send us five bucks."* However, going deeper, several creators expressed not wanting to feel like they were burdening, annoying, or shaming their audiences to donate or subscribe. Some referenced controversial incidents of creators berating their audiences over monetization.

At the same time, we found that creators get most of their income from subscriptions, so promoting subscriptions is key to earning a living on Twitch. Thus, creators perceive having to carefully walk a line between monetizing while not turning off their viewers. As Evelynn put it – *"Everything I do is asking for money while not actually asking for money"*.

We also found that several creators mentioned how their audiences were understanding and even pushed them to try and monetize or promote themselves more. We wonder if this suggests that the idea of having to carefully walk a line with monetization is mostly a perception among content creators, and not necessarily reflective of the audiences' view. Finally, some creators were quite confident in promoting monetization, but even they were careful to buffer their asks with humor or sarcasm. Steven, for example, would spoof a game show segment to make an entertaining segment out of asking for contributions:

> *"I have a soundboard and I'll just throw on some [gameshow] music, I'll go from whatever I'm doing full cam and I'll just look at the camera and completely do an impromptu pitch, just because. And it works, people love it. It's funny."- Steven*

➢ *How did creators feel towards Twitch?*

We asked nearly everyone we interviewed whether they had a warm or cold view of Twitch, and why. We hoped to capture some opinions and perspectives that could give insight into how creators think about their relationship with Twitch. Ultimately, we found that opinions were evenly divided, with roughly equal representation of cold, warm, and neutral views.

In general, the main issues driving cold views were related to the governance of the platform. For example, creators we interviewed in the fall of 2020 discussed frustrations with how Twitch was handling the DMCA:

> *"I can't go through literally thousands of thousands of hours of content, was delete your content. That was it. It was just delete it because we have no actual methods to be able to help you with the situation." – Frank*

Beyond specific issues like the DMCA, creators were also frustrated by the seemingly inconsistent enforcement of the Terms of Service (ToS). Jeremy, for example, expressed a common frustration about arbitrary banning decisions. *"If I go to look at the TOS and the person got banned for saying something and it's like, this isn't clearly defined. How did they know they weren't allowed to say it? That kind of bothers me."*

Among those who viewed Twitch more warmly, one of the most common themes was a recognition of the relationships and communities that the platform enabled. Sierra, *"Twitch has brought me a lot of happiness and I wouldn't have met the people that I'm closest to today if I wasn't on Twitch. That's where I've met the majority of my close friends right now."* Many expressed gratitude for the opportunity that the platform provides to make a career as a content creator. Suzy described this opportunity: *"it gave me the opportunity to do something when I couldn't do anything else with my life, and it gave me the opportunity to do that for free."*

The clustering of these themes may suggest that creators make a distinction between their communities and opportunities compared to the influence of the Twitch platform itself. Warm views of communities, friendships, and personal opportunities contrast frustrations with the governance and moderation of the platform itself.

➢ *Who influenced the stream: Creators, Viewers, or Twitch?*

Another theme related to our interest in understanding work on large digital platforms is the influence of platforms on the work of creators. We asked what creators felt was most influential in their daily work: either themselves, their audience, or the platform itself (Twitch). The most prevalent view was that creators themselves were most influential in their work, and

they felt a degree of control and freedom over what they did as content creators. As Lizzy put it, "*I would say it's probably me, again, because I have my focus set on what I want out of Twitch and on what I'm physically capable of doing in a moment.*"

Although we encountered similar perspectives to Lizzy's often, we found some alternative views presented by creators interesting. For example, Eric mentioned that he felt like he had good control over the content he made but felt that the Twitch platform had a greater say in how it performed. *"I would say some combination of the platform and me, I'm going to make content that I think will do well and the platform determines what will do well."* Tim mentioned a similar view, although noting a relationship between viewers and the recommendation systems on Twitch: *"I think it's a mix of the viewers and the platform together because the more the viewers like the content, the more it'll get recommended and the more successful the content will be if it's recommended more."*

We think these responses highlight how intertwined the influences of communities or viewers, individual creators, and the features of the Twitch platform are in shaping the work of content creators. Unlike traditional employment, which involves a single relationship with an employer, or self-employment which involves a relationship with clients, creators navigate a *triadic* relationship between themselves, their audiences, and the platforms they use. This is a unique feature of earning a living on digital platforms and applies to others like eBay or Etsy sellers and gig-platform workers.

<u>Interested in reading more academic work on Twitch?</u>

Below we included a list of books & articles that inspired our research. Feel free to reach out if you have trouble accessing the research papers. We are currently working on publishing the results of our study in academic journals and will share papers via our website in the future.

Taylor, L. R. 2018. *Watch Me Play. Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

Johnson, Mark R. 2019. "Inclusion and Exclusion in the Digital Economy: Disability and Mental Health as a Live Streamer on Twitch.Tv." *Information Communication & Society* 22(4):506–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1476575

Johnson, Mark R. 2021. "Behind the Streams: The Off-Camera Labour of Game Live Streaming." *Games and Culture*. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211005239

Gray, Kishonna L. 2017. "'They're Just Too Urban': Black Gamers Streaming on Twitch." in *Digital Sociologies*, edited by J. Daniels, K. Gregory, and T. McMillan Cottom. Policy Press.

Uttarapong, Jirassaya, Jie Cai, and Donghee Yvette Wohn. 2021. "Harassment Experiences of Women and LGBTQ Live Streamers and How They Handled Negativity." Pp. 7–19 in *ACM International Conference on Interactive Media Experiences*, *IMX '21*. New York, NY, USA: Association for Computing Machinery. https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3452918.3458794