TimtheTatman, FallGuys, & Dude Bro Streamers: Unpacking Hegemonic Masculinity on Twitch

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INTRODUCTION

On August 19, 2020, roughly 1.3 million people viewed Timothy 'TimTheTatman' Betar's Twitch stream, hoping to see the streamer's first Fall Guys win. The game launched August 4th and developed an impromptu marketing campaign by targeting one of Twitch's most popular streamers (Figure 1). This campaign was a viral success– by August 26th Fall Guys sold over 7 million copies on Steam, and was the most downloaded PS Plus game in PlayStation's history (Statt, 2020). However, a key component to the campaign's success was Betar's ability to authentically perform what I label the "Dude Bro Streamer" persona. The Dude Bro Streamer persona is a self-branding strategy that leverages specific performances of masculine bravado and aggression, deeply rooted in hegemonic, white and cisgender masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Welch, 2022). Dude Bro Streamers function similarly to 'fanboy auteurs' (Scott, 2019) and also benefit from the pervasive toxic geek masculinity (Salter & Blodgett, 2017) in gaming and on Twitch. Dude Bro Streamers like Betar leverage their white, cis-gendered masculinity and gaming expertise as cultural capital to appeal to Twitch's core viewers of 18-34 year-old men, further reinforcing androcentric hegemony in Twitch's creator economy.

Figure 1: FallGuys Twitter account accuses Betar of being a loser incapable of winning a game to antagonize Betar.

While Betar's entanglement with Fall Guys yielded significant social and cultural capital, it was particularly newsworthy because Twitch directly participated in the fracas with tweets that legitimized it as teasing between friends. A key point in legitimizing Fall Guys' teasing is that Betar's performance as a Dude Bro Streamer co-opts and profits from language and strategies used to attack and harass women, queer, and Black streamers (Gray, 2020; Cote, 2020). Fall Guys attacked Betar's perceived skill and expertise, prompting Betar's violent performance of his rage with his body (Messner, 1990), resulting in a record-breaking performance with millions of views on Betar's channel (Figure 2). While sponsors are famously wary of harassment, bigotry, and racism that can devalue the brand, Betar's willingness to play along with Fall Guy's and Twitch's criticisms allowed Betar to profit from

harassment in ways that marginalized streamers are largely unable to replicate, demonstrating that Dude Bro Streamers are free to play with and profit from rage.

Figure 2: Betar tweets, in seeming disbelief, a screenshot of his dashboard. Confirming the public interest in his FallGuys spectacle attracted over 1.295 million viewers, with an average of 182,574 concurrent viewers.

I conceptualize Twitch as a live streaming playground between social media entertainment (Cunningham & Craig, 2021), advertisers, and the corporate field of game development known as the AAA industry. Specifically, I analyze how bodies that perform as Dude Bro Streamers have access to opportunities that advance their career. Twitch encourages streamers to broadcast their leisure and recreational activities, further entangling gaming with other forms of entrepreneurial self-branding and relational labor commonly associated with social media entertainment. Twitch boasts to potential advertisers that 7 million people stream each month. However, only an estimated 51,000 streamers are included in the "Partner Program" that offers access to all monetization tools, signaling a significant disparity in who is allowed to professionalize their cultural production on Twitch. Therefore, studying Dude Bro Streamers identifies how men who uphold androcentric hegemony benefit from special treatment unlikely to be extended to streamers battling ongoing harassment.

BIGOTRY AND HARASSMENT IN ONLINE GAMES

Research on live streaming and gaming communities reveals that targeted harassment can prevent a creator from collaborating with an advertiser, and that this harassment occurs along racial, gendered, and sexual lines. For example, Kishonna Gray (2020) "illustrate[s] the white anxieties and fears that pervade responses to black bodies online" (p. 17), which ensure that black, or any other marginalized streamers, who do manage to succeed on Twitch do so in *spite* of the obstacles in their path. Christine Tran (2022) argued the mere presence of breasts is enough to attract misogynistic slurs like "Titty streamer" that challenge the streamer's perceived authenticity and questions the streamer's identity as a gamer and if they even belong on Twitch. Finally, Alice Marwick and Robyn Caplan (2018)

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outline how malicious internet users weaponize targeted harassment to maintain control over and prevent newcomers into online spaces, revealing yet another obstacle streamers from traditionally marginalized backgrounds must navigate. Therefore, these examples outline that cis-gendered heterosexual white men who have (mistakenly) been considered the primary or core gaming demographic since the 1990s (Cote, 2020), have significantly less obstacles that could potentially prevent them from collaborating with sponsors and platforms.

METHODOLOGY

This case study conducts an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) on tweets and other relevant news articles from August 11-20th about Betar and Fall Guys. The sample included tweets from Betar, Twitch, Fall Guys, prominent advertisers, and other influential streamers. I used an iterative thematic coding analysis to develop categories like 'streamer' and 'brand', then introduced specific subcategories to draw further connections between different posts in the data set. I coded these tweets and posts in qualitative coding software Dedoose, then used the word cloud and code co-occurrence features to identify overlapping codes in the data set. This iterative and thematic coding allowed me to construct thematic understandings of Betar's successful performances as a Dude Bro Streamer.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Preliminary findings indicate the Dude Bro Streamer persona is a strategy to align Betar's performance with Twitch, potential sponsors, and Twitch's core audience of 18-34 year-olds. The Fall Guys impromptu marketing campaign with Betar was built on Betar's *inability* to win a single game, similar to satirical 'manvertising' to use gendered performances to sell products (Barber & Bridges, 2017). Betar's personal appearance, mannerisms, and tweets all reinforce his status as a bona fide Dude Bro Streamer– despite his inability to win. Aesthetically, Betar's white skin, his fashion choices of t-shirts and backward ball caps, and his frequent use of words like "bro" or "dude" all reinforce his performance as a Dude Bro Streamer, while outlining how streamers who appeal to Twitch's perceived target demographic are also permitted 'frictionless entry' into lucrative promotional activities. Betar's performance is so obviously white and cis-gendered that it turns what would be a violent outburst from anyone else into lucrative entertainment that uses violence without alienating potential sponsors. This highlights how Dude Bro Streamers perform masculinity with their audiences throughout the Twitch creator economy, which values both serious and unserious forms of rage depending on who the target is.

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