

Following the Bunny: Gendered Labor and Digital Play in Livestreaming Cultures

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This paper explores the evolution of the Playboy Bunny as a cultural icon, focusing on its intersections with gaming and livestreaming cultures in the digital age. Originally introduced in the 1960s as hostesses of the Playboy Clubs, Bunnies embodied Playboy's ethos of leisure, sophistication, and masculine fantasy (Pitzulo 2011). Their meticulously regulated labor, governed by strict rules of appearance, comportment, and behavior, positioned the Bunny as a symbol of eroticized service and commodified femininity (Preciado 2014). In the present day, the Bunny has been reimagined both as a social media phenomenon (see figure 1) and within Playboy's digital platform, which leverages livestreaming, influencer branding, and self-presentation to remain culturally relevant.

Playboy's 2021 relaunch as a digital-only platform has reframed the Bunny as a entrepreneurial feminine figure (Cf Duffy 2015). Through its app, initially branded as "Centerfold" and modeled after platforms like OnlyFans, Playboy recruits high-profile influencers, including Twitch streamers, as "New Era Bunnies." This integration of gaming-adjacent figures, such as Amouranth and Mia Malkova, underscores the Bunny's migration into livestreaming spaces where gendered affective labor is central to audience engagement (Ruberg & Cullen 2019, Tran 2022). Drawing on parallels between livestreaming and sex work (Ruberg 2022), this paper interrogates how the Bunny mediates the dynamics of digital labor, algorithmic visibility, and the monetization of intimacy within gaming-adjacent economies.

This study employs a qualitative textual and discursive analysis of cultural phenomena to examine the intersection of gender, play, and labor within digital economies, combining historical-comparative analysis of labor regimes (e.g., Playboy Clubs and contemporary influencer economies) with platform analysis of livestreaming and creator platforms (such as Twitch and Centerfold) to investigate how gendered affective labor and algorithmic visibility are mediated and monetized.

By "following the Bunny," this paper examines the broader implications of gaming's entanglements with gendered labor. The Bunny's presence within livestreaming communities, coupled with the historical legacy of its highly curated labor practices, highlights how gaming cultures intersect with broader historical trends of commodified femininity and performative identity. This analysis draws attention to the continuity of gendered affective labor, from the regulated spaces of Playboy Clubs in the 1960s and 1970s to the algorithmic pressures of contemporary digital platforms. Moreover, it highlights the enduring ambivalence of the empowerment narratives that frame these labor practices as liberating, even as they reproduce exploitative dynamics.

This paper argues that the Playboy Bunny, as a symbolic figure of feminine entrepreneurial labor, provides a lens for understanding the entwinement of gaming cultures with broader

economies of gender, play, and media. The Bunny's digital revival reflects a transformation in how gaming and livestreaming spaces commodify pleasure and intimacy, challenging traditional boundaries between play and work. By tracing the Bunny's trajectory across decades, this paper contributes to discussions about the intersections of gaming, gender, and the evolving configurations of labor in digital economies.

Keywords:

Affective Labor, Gender, Historical analysis, Live-Streaming, Monetization, Playboy,

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