Pokimane, Myna Snacks and the Cookie Controversy: Combating Platform Dependency by Performing as the Streamer-Entrepreneur

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Keywords

Gaming streamers, identity performance, digital entrepreneurialism, platform dependency

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

On the 17th of November, 2024, popular gaming streamer Ludwig posted a video covering what streamers have coined the 'Twitch Adpocalypse.' Where previously streamers were able to generate income from ads, "this is all kind of gone now. The advertisers are pulling out…" (Mogul Mail, 2024, 3:31-3:40). Recently, more and more gaming streamers have begun experiencing the fragility of their platform-dependent careers, establishing start-ups to generate a steady stream of income and combat their platform dependency. That being said, not all businesses lead to success, with some streamers receiving pushback from their audience. One such streamer is popular female gaming streamer Pokimane, who received backlash after announcing her snack company, Myna Snacks, and releasing its first product, the Midnight Mini cookies, on November 15th, 2023. Amongst supportive replies from fellow streamers and her audience, many critiqued the steep price of the cookies, calling Pokimane a fraud who merely up-priced and rebranded an existing product.

Streaming, as it is known today, is a relatively new content format that emphasizes audience interactivity and engagement (El Afi & Quiddad, 2021; Ruberg et al., 2023; T. P. B. Smith et al., 2013; Taylor, 2018). Gaming streamers in particular have significantly shaped streaming culture and practices (Ruberg et al., 2023), with Pokimane being a prominent figure in the streaming space. Research on streaming has explored what characteristics streamers must perform to be successful, such as being energetic and relatable (Khamis et al., 2017; Marwick, 2015; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). However, other research has pointed out that not all identities are seen as congruent with the streamer identity, with gender performance, for instance, affecting success in streaming (Catá, 2019; Cullen, 2022; Freeman & Wohn, 2020; Han et al., 2023; Persaud & Perks, 2022; Shaw, 2012; Uttarapong et al., 2021; Youngblood, 2022). Although this research illustrates that particular characteristics and identity categories determine who is accepted as a streamer, a research gap remains regarding how other identities are balanced alongside a streamer's identity. This paper will expand on existing research by studying how streamers adopt entrepreneurial identities to challenge platform dependency. Understanding how streamers align the identity of the streamer and entrepreneur can provide insights into the evolving landscape of content creation, as

well as how minorities are often excluded from opportunities due to the gaming space being a heterosexual, white, male-dominated space. Understanding Pokimane's performance as a streamer-entrepreneur is critical as it influences the streaming space overall, paving a way for smaller, minority streamers who fall outside of partnership deals to generate income.

As previously stated, content creators are increasingly pushed to adopt entrepreneurial practices to generate income, creating new forms of entrepreneurship (Hidayat & Hidayat, 2020; Hogan, 2010; Kücklich, 2005; Persaud & Perks, 2022; Poell et al., 2021; Törhönen et al., 2021; Wollborn et al., 2023). Entrepreneurship has its own characteristics, norms and standards that those adopting an entrepreneurial identity need to perform to convince their audience of their competency (Vitanova, 2023). Again, even if these characteristics and gestures are performed, this does not mean that the performance will be accepted, as, similarly to the streaming identity, the entrepreneur has been mostly associated with the white-male European identity. Scholarship has noted that not only do streaming platforms have monetization at their core, but streamers have to turn themselves into a brand to be consumed by viewers, meaning that there has always been a degree of entrepreneurship at the core of streaming (Chalk, 2022; Khamis et al., 2017; Marwick, 2015). However, recent research has observed that platforms are pushing content creators to adopt the entrepreneurial identity more fully (Poell et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this research observes a general shift in the content creation space and does not examine in detail how content creators combat the precarity of their platform-dependent careers. This paper will contribute to existing research on digital entrepreneurship by studying one of the various strategies employed by content creators. In addition, this paper will expand on this research, observing how these content creators navigate the expectations and norms of both their streamer and entrepreneurial identities, to shed light on the difficulties streamers, especially minorities, face when adopting a second identity.

To do this, this paper employs Goffman's (1956) theory of The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life as its theoretical framework; Goffman views impression management and identity expression as a theatrical performance where each individual plays a part in front of an audience, presenting an image of themselves that is highly idealized. Performers communicate their identity through what he calls dramatized signs: specific acts/signs that reflect the qualities and attributes linked to the norms and expectations tied to a particular identity role. Goffman's theory suits the case study as it not only deconstructs the performance of the performer, but also pays close attention to the influence of the stage and the audience. As a result, Goffman allows for platform affordances and audience interaction, important aspects of streaming, to be taken into account. Furthermore, Goffman approached identity performance as dynamic, changing depending on the audience. Thus, Goffman provides tools to understand the dynamic between Pokimane's identity performance and her dissatisfied audience. In addition, Goffman's (1961) later work on role distance focuses on how multiple, even clashing, identities merge, which this paper wishes to analyse. This paper, therefore, utilises Goffman (1956, 1961) to deconstruct how Pokimane conveys dramatized signs and attempts to perform multiple identities by incorporating the dramatized signs associated with one identity during the performance of another.

This paper, consequently, explores how Pokimane attempts to merge the gaming streamer and entrepreneurial identity and why this ultimately seems to fail. The first

part of this paper focuses on the role of the platform in this performance. The paper, for example, examines how the platforms Pokimane employs to promote her new company shape and influence how Pokimane is supposed to balance her two identities. By choosing her streamer-related platforms, such as announcing her new company during a stream on Twitch (Pokimane, 2023), Pokimane cannot solely perform as an entrepreneur, as these platforms are usually reserved for her gaming streamer identity performance. The second part of the paper focuses on Pokimane's attempt to control how her performance is received. To illustrate, this part of the paper analyses how Pokimane employs humour to distance herself from the role of an entrepreneur and adopt characteristics more commonly associated with her gaming streamer identity. Lastly, the paper will study the audience surrounding Pokimane's identity performance. The paper, for instance, concludes that due to context collapse, Pokimane has to navigate multiple groups, each with different expectations of how a gaming streamer and/or entrepreneur should act. Together, these groups shape Pokimane's identity performance, illustrating the difficulty of managing multiple perspectives in the online space.

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