

Gaming streamers as influencers and intermediaries: Differentializing the micro, meso and macro contexts of streaming

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Playing by watching: Video game streams on platforms such as Twitch and YouTube are already an integral part of everyday life for around 18 million Germans (Steininger, 2023). The cosmos of streamers and let's players, who can act as entertainers and informers as well as advertisers, has evolved into a key marketing channel for the video game industry. According to data from YouGov (Steininger, 2023), 54 percent of German viewers of streams use them as a source for buying decisions. Consequently, gaming streamers have worldwide a considerable influence on the success of games (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019) and fulfill multiple roles between information, entertainment, and advertisement. This fluid transition was 2024 demonstrated by the German Computer Game Awards, where Maurice Weber, former editor at the news magazine GameStar, won a prize for his new profession as gaming streamer (DCS, 2024).

In the field of game culture streamers and let's players are an expression of the current phenomenon of content creators which play an increasingly role in public communication (in more detail Nitschke 2024) and even opinion forming (Woodcock & Johnson, 2021). But the the role of streamers as hybrid actors in public communication has not been studied specifically in the gaming sector. Most research on game streams focuses on a descriptive approach, examining audience relationships or off-camera practices (Wang & Liu, 2020; Sherrick et al., 2023). T. L. Taylor (2018) in particular is known for providing comprehensive insight into the work of Twitch's broadcasters. However, Taylor's fieldwork took place at the very beginning of professionalized streaming (2018, p. 9) and, like most current studies, focused

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specifically on Twitch (or Johnson, 2024). However, there is still limited research on the cross-platform practices of professional and hobbyist creators engaging in commented gameplay. Current research not only lacks an approach that acknowledges these different time, social and spatial contexts and in relation to each other (Wurm & Wimmer, 2024), as well as their meaning and purpose for their creators as well as viewers, but also a theoretical framework analyzing the practices of streamers differentiating their social impact on a micro-, meso- and macro-level. We approach this by systematically differentiating these overlapping contexts, drawing on theories of communicative figuration (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018) and its application to game contexts (Schwarzenegger et al. 2024). By doing so, we identify analytically the contexts of self, community, industry and platformization as relevant dimensions for understanding the public role of streamers for gaming culture and beyond.

Self stands for the individual: the practices of a gaming streamer can be influenced by personal values, games they grew up with, and/or role perception. Community represents the audience of streamers as well as professionalized networks like agencies. Industry represents the video games industry. It highly influences the individual and institutional sphere amongst others by developing new games and by deciding who will be allowed to gain insight. The process of platformization refers to the role of platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, which function not only as content distributors but also as infrastructures for community-building around streamers. Therefore, game studios, as well as streamers highly depend on them.

Through the introduction of these dimensions, we hope to encourage new perspectives on researching gaming streamer and their social role, especially as the interplay between personal motivation, audience feedback, industrial incentives, and platform logics remains largely unexplored. Applying this approach may also spark further discussions on viewing gaming streamers' similarities to other digital intermediaries like political influencers (Nitschke, 2024).

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