Material Culture on Twitch

Live-Streaming Cosplay, Gender, and Beauty

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INTRODUCTION

As a business model, the monetization of streams and ephemeral live content is a key trend on YouTube and Instagram. A particular favorite among content creators is Twitch, a unique and fan-driven platform where streamers upload content and audiences participate through chat. Millions of streamers upload hours of content each day and create interactive and engaging spaces for narrow-casting. According to the analytics of Twitchtracker, 660 billion minutes of content were watched on Twitch in 2019, produced by an average of 3.6 million streamers monthly.[1] In January 2020 alone, 3,935,308 streamers were active on Twitch with an average of 1,357,375 viewers.

Twitch offers an accessible interface for streamers but also stands out in its options for micro-donations and crowdfunding. One of the most successful streams on Twitch in 2019 was a Donkey Kong 64 livestream held by Hbomberguy for Mermaid, a charity for transgender children. Samantha Riedel reports: "Over the course of the 57-hour stream, viewers donated a total of more than $347,000, blowing past all of Brewis's donation goals and staggering even Mermaids chair Susie Green."[2] American politician

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1   https://twitchtracker.com/statistics

2   Riedel, Samantha: "What a Viral Twitch Stream for Trans Charity Says About Modern Activism," in: *them* (2019); https://www.them.us/story/hbomberguy-twit ch-stream-trans-charity

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez joined the stream for ten minutes to discuss transgender oppression and its connection to economic marginalization.

While Twitch started as a platform to stream video games, by now, its content has become very diverse and one of its most popular categories is "just chatting," which simply features streamers discussing their interests and having Q&As with their viewers. Streamers engage in cooking, weightlifting, table-top role-playing games, and many different practices to create their unique personal brand. The secret of the platform's success are these millions of heterogeneous streamers, who contribute unique live content. Twitch's instructions for new streamers urge them to build their own personal brand and create a stream that fits their personality: "Take a minute to think about what makes you or your stream unique and run with that. Do you live and breathe the color orange? Stream from an ice fishing shack? Have a weird catchphrase? Whatever it is that makes you, 'you', can be a jump off for your personal branding."[3] Still, Twitch is not only the domain of user-generated content, it can also be an interactive broadcasting tool. Increasingly Twitch also broadcasts official content that audiences group around. In collaboration with BBC, Twitch hosted a marathon of the classic DOCTOR WHO episodes from 17 February 2019 onwards. For many viewers, this was the first time watching the classic episodes. Old and new fans grouped together around the episodes, formed memes, and acted as mentors who introduced each other into the lore of DOCTOR WHO. In other words, Twitch can also function as an archive and a space for fan literacy.

Formerly known as Justin.tv, Twitch was founded in 2007 as a service for social television that gave users the capacity to broadcast their own video streams.[4] With the rise of competitive eSports, the platform has rapidly become one of the most popular live-streaming channels on the Internet. The platform has been criticized, though, particularly as a gendered platform. In 2017, Twitch advertising reported that 81.5 % of its users are male.[5] Throughout the years, Twitch took notice of its gendered community and

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3 https://www.twitch.tv/creatorcamp/en/level-up/personal-branding/

4 Rose, Mike: "Twitch Parent Company Rebrands as Twitch Interactive," in: *Gamasutra*, January 10, 2014; https://ww.gamatra.com/view/news/210384/Twitch_parent_com-pany_rebrands_as_Twitch_Interactive.php

5 https://www.twitchadvertising.tv/audience/

particular problems and adjusted its guidelines to make the platform more inclusive.

Throughout the years, Twitch became a prominent streaming platform, shifting its focus from games to a wide range of content. Audiences turn to it for live-cooking shows, fitness videos, board game evenings, casual conversations, and to watch technical tutorials. Twitch is best understood as a platform where different micro-communities meet. This study is specifically interested in the communities on Twitch that meet beyond gaming to offer insights into how the platform might otherwise be used. Specifically, I focus on streams that pertain to cosplay and how different practices (e.g., costume creation, chatting about costumes) are framed on Twitch.

While live-streaming on different platforms is increasingly researched, there has been little work on how they build their content on existing games and media and enrich them. Moreover, live-streaming can create a secondary order of play, which is what this chapter specifically focuses on. Cosplay and table-top role-playing on Twitch, for instance, are games in and of themselves, but may also have transmedia qualities in them by referring to particular source texts. Finally, the audience can have a role on Twitch by participating in the chat, creating another layer of gameplay and textuality. This play may be augmented even further, as in the case of "Twitch Plays Pokémon," where the original game was turned into a large social experiment through the chat function.[6]

Doing a study on Twitch means entangling these different modes. The interface of Twitch is a potpourri of different texts in and of itself and thereby lends itself to different forms of play, performances. In this chapter, I pay specific attention to the practices on Twitch as forms of communication and text. How do Twitch streamers build on existing content, such as video games, in their fan practices? Moreover, how do they use existing brands to build a brand on their own?

Specifically, I am interested in how fans operate on platforms such as Twitch. Through a case study of cosplay streams, I offer insights into how performances and discussions involving the cosplay community are framed on Twitch. Beyond analyzing the content itself, I aim to explore how fans strategically use the platform for monetization purposes and storytelling. In

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6   Ramirez, Dennis/Saucerman, Jenny/Dietmeier, Jeremy: "Twitch Plays Pokemon: A Case Study in Big G Games," *Proceedings of DiGRA*, DiGra 2014, pp.1-10.

this chapter, I argue that cosplay streamers on Twitch use the platform in innovative ways to make costuming and everyday creativity more visible and meaningful. The streamers that were examined for the purpose of this research clearly sustain small communities of dedicated viewers. The attraction of Twitch, then, lies in its possibility to create public spheres that feel intimate and private. Hobbies and lifestyles, such as cosplay, can be opened up fully to outsiders, and become spectacles in their own right.

PLATFORMS AND TWITCH

Like YouTube, Periscope, and other services, Twitch stands out in their purposeful construction of the streamers as a content creators, who potentially become themselves brands or influencers. Twitch endorses this business model, encouraging its streamers to develop a personal brand and monetize their practices. Ideally, a Twitch streamer becomes a user who generates income, an Affiliate, which is the first step to becoming a full-on Twitch Partner, who has even more perks. Affiliates can generate revenue through subscription options ranging from $4.99, $9.99 and $24.99, but also through "Bits," virtual tokens that the audiences can use to support streamers in the chat, which also translate into revenue.

Becoming an Affiliate requires substantial activity on the channel, and Twitch formulates the requirements as follows: "We're looking for streamers who aren't yet Partners, but who have at least 50 followers and over the last 30 days have [had] at least 500 total minutes broadcast, 7 unique broadcast days, and an average of 3 or more concurrent viewers."[7] In her discussion of Twitch, its relationship to partner company Amazon, Emma Knight is critical of the business model: "While the Twitch Affiliate Program model may look like a harmless peer-to-peer exchange, Twitch (and thereby Amazon) is the ultimate winner: they take a 50 percent cut of each monthly subscription fee."[8]

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7   https://affiliate.twitch.tv/

8   Knight, Emma: "Twitch.Tv: A Socially Valuable Platform, or Just Another Amazon Revenue Stream?" in: *Masters of Media*, 24 October, 2018; https://mastersof media.hum.uva.nl/blog/2018/10/24/monetization-on-twitch-investigating-the-rel ationship-between-audience-creator-and-content/

Culturally, Twitch cannot be read in isolation from influencer culture and the rise of the online micro-celebrity. This shapes the aesthetics and content of the videos and their production context. In *Internet Celebrity*, Abidin writes: "The aesthetic of calibrated amateurism has a leveling effect because Influencers appear less constructed, less filtered, more spontaneous, and more real, thus fostering feelings of relatability and authenticity."[9] In this sense, Twitch is paradigmatic of a larger change towards new textualities and ephemeral content.

This shift, which can also be described as a change from archival to ephemeral content, has implications for the text and influencer culture, as Abidin notes:

"Influencers are shifting from a culture of archived semi-permanent content to one of streaming always-transient content. More specifically, the aesthetic of Influencer content is expanding from the feels of pristine, high-quality images that were dominantly 'repository format' social media, to include simultaneously haphazard, spontaneous, raw footage on 'transient format' social media."[10]

When understood as a textual performance, the live, raw footage of Twitch stands out. However, because of its many features build into the streaming software, including options for side-bars and live background music, Twitch streams do not necessarily look raw, but also remediate aspects of mass broadcasting.

If we theorize further about what kind of content Twitch offers, several concepts stand out and can serve as productive, analytical lenses. First, Twitch can be understood as a unique form of paratextuality.[11] This form of textuality traditionally refers less to a productive audience and more to other material that surrounds a text, such as covers, flavor texts, or comments by an author. In the case of games, this understanding of paratexts becomes more complicated as the publication model of games evolves. Games are increasingly published and promoted on different platforms, such as Steam,

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9   Abidin, Crystal: *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*, Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited 2018, p. 92.

10   Ibid., pp. 90-91.

11   Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997.

that have different texts embedded in them by developers and gamers alike. Streaming is iconic of the trend that games are not only played but watched in different venues, including the competitive eSport scene.[12]

In this sense, Twitch is most frequently a commentary of a source-text, such as a video game, creating something that Genette would have called "metatextuality:" "The […] type of textual transcendence [which] unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it (without summoning it) […]. This is the critical relationship par excellence."[13] However, Twitch streams are not only a meta-textual phenomenon that comments on another textual artifact (such as games) but still very much and clearly a paratext in the literal sense, as the comments are visibly and literally attached *next* ('para') to the game's stream, as I will point out in more detail in the following section. As more content is streamed, tighter communities are formed and users keep returning to certain streams.

Streaming constructs a certain kind of paratextuality, exactly because of its narrowcasting. Like podcasters, streamers often build a formula that consists of unique comments, storylines, references, running gags. Streams, in this sense, can be understood as paratexts or commentary, as well as a tool of inclusion, to sustain an audience base that is 'in the know.' By repurposing older content, such as classic DOCTOR WHO episodes, Twitch also engages in another mode of textuality that has been described as "paratextual memory," by Hills and Garde-Hansen, which constructs a sense of "having been there" at key moments of broadcasting, even when a fan was historically not present.[14] In other words, Twitch includes different types of paratextual practices: (1) the paratexts of the games, stories and experiences that are being streamed, (2) the streamed commentary of the platform, Twitch itself, and (3) the cultural memory of fans and gamers.

Furthermore, Twitch has different modalities that create a unique interface with different modes (see table 1), generating a paratextual layer next to

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12 Taylor, T.L: *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, Massachusets: MIT Press 2012.

13 Genette, Gérard: *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1997, p.4.

14 Hills, Matt/Garde-Hansen, Joanne: "Fandom's Paratextual Memory: Remembering, Reconstructing, and Repatriating 'Lost' Doctor Who," in: *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34 (2) (2017), p. 1.

the video stream. A Twitch stream can have multiple prompts and screens embedded in it, prompting viewers to follow, subscribe (for free or against a price), or sign up to Instagram or Patreon as well. Finally, the audience itself interacts through chat in the sidebar and their texts, including emojis, feed into the live-streaming experience as well. Twitch experiences often mix modes, such as visuals, voice chat, background music, chatting, and different bars for information. A streamer can for instance use a plug-in to show how many donations were raised during a fundraising stream, or integrate a bar that shows who was their latest subscriber.

This multi-modality can be challenging. A large quantitative study of Twitch even describes it as the chat and its potential for cacophony, defining it as an "overload regime" that streamers may want to avoid.[15] For unfamiliar audiences, Twitch is certainly a platform that is heavy on interaction and different types of input, and that is part of its formula and beauty for dedicated users. Each stream is perhaps best read as a community or experience, rather than a content or story. It is in the interaction that Twitch becomes interesting, and in the ways in which audiences actively tune in and out of different streams.

Table 1: The interface of Twitch, where textuality becomes a business model

Text	Function	Input
Primary stream	Footage game or experience	Streamer
Secondary streams	Presentation of self, character or games	Streamer
Bars	Donations, prompts	Sources Twitch
Chat	Interaction	Audience

Source: N. Lamerichs

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15 Nematzadeh, Azadeh et al: "Information Overload in Group Communication: From Conversation to Cacophony in the Twitch Chat," in: *Royal Society Open Science* 6 (10) (2019).

Finally, the content uploaded on Twitch is live, and this liveness is a key quality of the texts. Live media have the power to build unique content and communities, from micro to macro, and combine this with intimacy and a sense of presence. Improvisation is key in streams, and one of the reasons why audiences enjoy it. This is most clearly demonstrated in successful table-top role-playing games on Twitch, such as *Highrollers*, where different players engage in unscripted in-character performances together. The content is not just real-time but actively constructed around a fear of missing out. Through liveness and improvisation, audiences can enjoy seemingly authentic, and highly performative media. These viewers tune in for live content, in other words, that engages them and that they do not want to miss out on.

Thousands of channels compete on Twitch every hour, each of them a tiny pocket of the internet that viewers ideally return to. In *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*, T.L. Taylor describes the aesthetics of Twitch as a "tone of authenticity, affective engagement, and connection to the audience," but also remarks that streamers are not "open books."[16] Through interaction and intimacy, audiences feel that they know the streamers. At best, Twitch can function as a co-creative platform, where streamers and audiences build on each other's remarks. Being a welcoming host that facilitates quality discussions is perhaps the most essential trait that successful Twitch streamers possess. Co-creation on Twitch, however, does not have to stop there. Different role-playing channels, such as HyperRPG, use the chat function also to let the audience weigh in on narrative decisions.

In other words, Twitch content is highly immediate, transient, and interactive. It is no wonder that Twitch has become a sphere of different communities, which each can be understood as potential bubbles and silos. Twitch is the space where cosplayers have friendly chats with each other, but also a medium where communities play shooters or watch other gamers casually chat about their lives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some educators even used the streaming service for hosting lectures or seminars.

In this chapter, I will reveal that the diversity of content can also be the strength of Twitch. In these pockets of the internet, young female streamers speak up and share their hobbies enthusiastically, which is not possible in the monoculture of broadcasting.

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16 T.L. Taylor: *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2018, p. 99.

COSPLAY AND CONTROVERSY

Twitch is an example of what I describe as platform fandom, a complex eco-system that functions as an interface on the one hand, but is also a fan-driven business model that companies, like Amazon, profit from on the other hand. In this chapter, I show how platform fandom gives space to audiences to ex-press creativity and play in particular and enables them to become "fantrepreneurs."[17] The case study of this chapter consists of a variety of streams that connect to cosplay and costuming. Cosplay is one way in which fans express their feelings for fictional characters in a creative way. Fans on Twitch who create costumes do not only create new texts in a metaphorical way, but also in the original sense of the word which refers to textile fabric. Cosplay is a material, embodied expression, based on existing story worlds, and a form of intermediality.[18] It can be read as a form of sartorial fandom, in which dress-up, embodiment and fashion are crucial.

As a performance, cosplay can be understood as a form of imaginative play and re-enactment, through which fans form social communities and ties.[19] However, the process of cosplay is much wider, and scholars such as Crawford and Hancock have drawn attention to cosplay creation as a crea-tive, critical making process.[20] While the process of cosplay starts with cre-ation, private fittings, and photoshoots beforehand, the primary stages for cosplay are fan conventions, where cosplayers wear their outfits and might participate in contests. The beauty of social media like Twitch, Instagram and YouTube is that they make the private public. As I shall show in this chapter, this border between the private and public is very noticeable in co-splay streams, where trying out new make-up, sewing techniques, and

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17 Scott, Suzanne. *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*, New York: NYU Press 2019, pp. 169-172.

18 Lamerichs, Nicolle: *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2018.

19 Mountfort, Paul/Peirson-Smith, Anne/Geczy, Adam: *Planet Cosplay: Costume Play, Identity and Global Fandom*, Bristol: Intellect Books Limited 2018; Winge, Theresa: *Costuming Cosplay: Dressing the Imagination*. Bloomsbury: Blooms-bury Academic 2018.

20 Crawford, Gary/Hancock, David: *Cosplay and the Art of Play: Exploring Sub-Culture through Art*, Berlin: Springer International Publishing 2019.

donning on parts of outfits are publically broadcasted. In their streams, fans make private processes, such as costume creation and photoshoots, public. This creates a lively scene around cosplay beyond the convention and allows cosplayers to share their excitement about a performance beforehand. It also allows audiences to peek into the hidden processes of cosplay as a form of labor.

Through their practices, cosplayers comment and build upon narrative and engage in what might be called *embodied paratextuality*. They create a paratext (e.g., a costume) which becomes a unique text and has a life of its own. This text again can be mediated, for instance, by streaming the design process on Twitch or wearing the costume during a let's play. In other words, while cosplay performances take place offline, they are remediated into photography and different genres of film, including streams and cosplay music videos. As paratexts, cosplays are deeply meaningful. These costumes allow audiences to experiment with their identity, body and gender (e.g., cross-play). In this sense, fans construct their identity actively, for instance, in terms of gender,[21] sexuality,[22] or age.[23] In other words, cosplayers experiment with new roles, forms of belonging as well as materiality and "stuff."[24]

While cosplay can be empowering, it can also become the terrain of controversy, trolling, and harassment, which is well-captured by the "cosplay is not consent" movement and related hashtags. Like in other paratextual practices and fandom in general, this can involve gate-keeping and exclusion that must not be overlooked. The sexism and racism in these communities have

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21 Lamerichs, Nicolle: "Stranger Than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplaying," in: *Transformative Works and Cultures,* 7 (2011).

22 Gn, Joel: "Queer Simulation: The Practise, Performance and Pleasure of Cosplay," in: *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 25 (4) (2019), pp. 583-593.

23 Skentelbery, Daniel. "I Feel Twenty Years Younger. Age-Bending Cosplay," in: *FNORD* (2019); https://readfnord.wordpress.com/2019/07/02/i-feel-twenty-years-younger-age-bending-cosplay/

24 Jenkins, Henry/Lamerichs, Nicolle: "Fan Materiality and Affect: Interview with Nicolle Lamerichs," in: *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, September 12, 2019; http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2019/9/8/interview-with-nicholle-lamerichs-part-3-9d928

been well-documented in recent fan studies by Suzanne Scott[25] and Rukmini Pande.[26] The research of Kishonna L. Gray shows how Twitch can become a hotbed for these issues, and how the marginalization and harassment of black streamers are common in digital spaces, which are often framed and constructed as white.[27]

Twitch itself has also been criticized for offering a platform to problematic users, and for how it moderated its content, which I will discuss in detail below. In a quantitative study on Twitch and their comments, Nakandala and colleagues found evidence of sexism on the platform, noting that female streamers were objectified more than their male counterparts: "the messages posted by users who comment only in female channels tend to have semantic similarity with objectifying cues while those who comment only in male channels tend to have semantic similarity with more game-related terms."[28] While this study largely confirms the gendered views of Twitch, the study itself only differentiates between popular male and female streamers and does not include any non-binary or trans-streamers.

Twitch has adjusted its guidelines often to make it a safer and more inclusive space, for instance by introducing clauses on hateful content. Twitch defines "hateful content" in their recent guidelines from October 24, 2019, as:

"Hateful conduct is any content or activity that promotes, encourages, or facilitates discrimination, denigration, objectification, harassment, or violence based on race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation,

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25 Scott, Suzanne: *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*, New York: NYU Press 2019.

26 Pande, Rukmini: *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*, Iowa: University of Iowa Press 2018.

27 Gray, Kishonna: "They're too urban: Black gamers streaming on Twitch," in: Daniels, Jessie/Gregory, Karen/McMillan Cotton, Tressie (eds.), *Digital Sociologies*, Policy Press 2016, pp. 355-368.

28 Nakandala, Supun et al: "Gendered Conversation in a Social Game-Streaming Platform," in: *Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (2017), pp. 169.

age, disability, medical condition, physical characteristics, or veteran status, and is prohibited. Any hateful conduct is considered a zero-tolerance violation."[29]

In line with their policies on hateful content, Twitch has banned streamers who communicate transphobic expressions, such as Greekgodx who mocked the different gender options on Spotify[30] or streamer HelenaLive who stated there are only two genders.[31]

While platforms can amplify problematic and hateful content, the framing of these issues is always cultural. When a streamer on Twitch engaged in a problematic blackface cosplay, she was immediately banned for posting racist content. In *Kotaku*, Cecilia D'Anastasio contextualizes the incident:

"While aesthetic fidelity can be a primary concern for cosplayers, altering racial appearance easily devolves into stereotyping and recalls the history of the practice. On top of that, black cosplayers have faced numerous barriers getting into the cosplay scene because, traditionally, there are comparatively few characters […] who appear black or dark-skinned."[32]

This Twitch controversy does not stand in isolation. In the cosplay community, blackface is commonly a no-go, but the debate is still ongoing. When a nominee for the EuroCosplay competition was banned in 2019 for engaging in blackface, her cancellation led to a backlash.[33] This was sparked by the

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29 https://www.twitch.tv/p/legal/community-guidelines

30 Jackson, Lara: "Twitch Streamer Banned for Mocking Alternative Gender Options," in: *Gamebyte*, September 19, 2019; https://www.gamebyte.com/twitch-streamer-banned-for-mocking-alternative-gender-options

31 Asarch, Steven: "Streamer Helenalive Speaks out after Being Banned from Twitch for Saying There Are Only Two Genders," in: *Newsweek*, December 2, 2019; https://www.newsweek.com/helenalive-twitch-ban-there-are-only-two-genders-1329214

32 D'Anastasio, Cecilia: "Twitch Punishes White Apex Legends Cosplayer Who Painted Her Face Black," in: *Kotaku*, April 15, 2019; https://kotaku.com/twitch-punishes-white-apex-legends-cosplayer-who-painte-1834055934

33 Lemieux, Melissa: "French Cosplay Champ Removed from Eurocosplay Finals over Blackface Accusation," in: *Newsweek*, October 11, 2019; https://www.news

cosplayer in question and her followers, who argued that she only did it be-
cause she loved the character, and wanted to be faithful to his appearance.
Naturally, this reasoning around authenticity is deeply problematic, espe-
cially because it ignores the cultural context of blackface, and how it hurts
persons of color. Still, because of these incidents, the discussion is still a
topical one. While the debate on blackface goes beyond the scope of this
chapter, cosplay researcher Karen Heinrich has unpacked blackface in the
community carefully in relation to whiteness and privilege.[34] What this de-
bate tells us is that cosplay on Twitch cannot be read in isolation, but is part
of larger discussions around media culture and representation.[35]

Incidents of moderation reveal a lot about the politics of Twitch. The
guidelines formulated to protect users, and create a safe space, are also
weaponized against them. This is not a neutral platform, but a set of different
communities with different values that might clash. Twitch is a complicated
platform to research. Therefore, the follow-up questions should be: Exactly
what types of content are posted, and how do they represent embodiment,
including race and gender? And what can a research design look like that can
be used to answer these questions?

METHODS AND APPROACH TO TWITCH

The liveness of Twitch is compelling, and its interface multifold. However,
the many voices and interactions can also pose challenges to researchers,
since it is almost impossible to make general claims about the platform. For
a large part, the Twitch experience consists of micro-casting to a relatively
small group of users, and this is what makes it so compelling. However, to

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week.com/french-cosplay-champ-removed-eurocosplay-finals-over-blackface-ac
cusation-1464756

34 Heinrich, Karen: "All Black and White? Racism and Blackface in Cosplay," in:
Wigs 101, October 20, 2019; https://wigs101.com/all-black-and-white-racism-an
d-blackface-in-cosplay

35 Likewise, expressions of sexuality and nudity in cosplay are also subjected to
moderation on Twitch and have cultural connotations. The question with contro-
versies around 'sexually suggestive content' is not least whether women are not
also subjected to policing of their body.

mimic and document these dynamics requires an experimental approach and mindset from scholars.

This study combines content analysis with the close-reading of various channels but is also inspired by platform studies[36] and observational stances in netnography.[37] The study was conducted by systematically viewing Twitch live-streams in January and February 2020 by searching the category Beauty and Fashion, Crafts and Making, as well as filtering by the "cosplay" tag. From the results, only relevant expressions of streamers in cosplay, chatting about cosplay, or working on costumes, were sampled. There were also many unrelated results, which were tagged as "cosplay" but had no relation to it. My selection was based on channels that were live though I could not always watch the whole live streams.

During my viewings, I maintained a log that combined field notes, screenshots, and relevant quotes from the streamer and chat, as well as remarks about the paratextual combination of Twitch's interface. To keep track of the content, I also did a content analysis in the form of a table that I could draw from at any point (see table 2). After sampling, I frequently went back to the videos and their chats after a stream was finished. My stance was primarily observatory and I only engaged with the chat option on rare occasions.

In terms of coding, I met several challenges during this project. First, several streamers had different live streams over the course of this project, working on the same outfit. I briefly tuned in with these new streaming sessions but did not extensively watch or code them a second or third time. Second, most streams were several hours long, and I usually watched them for ten to thirty minutes before going to the next channel. While I did go back to browse the streams, my analysis is indicative of the kind of content but does not provide a full overview of each stream. Third, certain streams on the tags were adjacent to cosplay but not sampled and coded. The ASMR videos in colored anime wigs by Roxy_Rose, for instance, involved costumes, but were not about cosplay or feature existing fictional characters, and were excluded from the corpus.

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36 Gillespie, Tarleton: *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press 2018.

37 Kozinets, Robert: *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, Los Angeles, London: SAGE 2010.

Table 2: Fragment content analysis (full analysis below)

Streamer	Date & Start	Live	Total	Content	Lang
Andyraecosplay	18-1-2020, 15:40	433	964	Bodypaint: Attack on Titan	E
Maulcosplay	18-1-2020, 15:15	66	18,690	Props: Making gun	G
KayPikeFashion	18-1-2020, 19:30	178	7,159,624	Bodypaint: Lara Croft (TR)	E
eveillecosplay	18-1-2020, 19:30	7	128,440	Creation: Ysera (WoW)	E
Maid4uCafe	18-1-2020, 19:30	75	245,573	Commercial: Maid café stream	E/J
lilsproutstudios	18-1-2020, 19:50	5	232	Props: Hearthstone	E
Lowbudgetcos	22-1-2020, 18:09	3	1,121	Creation: Kalluko (HxH)	G
Gunaretta	22-1-2020, 18:36	79	36,053	Creation: Shamir (Fire Emblem)	G
SarahnadeMakes	22-1-2020, 18:43	7	5,440	Creation: Sans (Undertale)	E
AcriterLupus	22-1-2020, 18:47	7	335	Creation: Angewoman (Digimon)	E
KimontheRocks	26-1-2020, 19:23	19	461	Home: Reorganizing costumes	G

Source: N. Lamerichs

Finally, Twitch is a global platform, with many different language communities present. Though I found cosplay streams in many languages, my sample focused on the streams that I could understand (English, German, French and Dutch language). While I am a native Dutch speaker, I found barely any videos in my own language. It is also important to be wary of the time zones. I logged in from The Netherlands in the evening, during the week. While I occasionally found videos from the United States, Japan or Australia, streamed in the mornings or afternoons, most videos were European. This sample contains many German streams, which tells us a lot about the popularity of this practice in Germany. As this analysis shows, 22 channels (18 costumes and 4 props) are related to creation, and provide insights in the maker culture behind cosplay performances. In general, these videos cannot be understood simply as tutorials, though cosplayers sometimes go deeper into the creation process, as I will explain in the analysis. Rather cosplayers discuss different matters with their audiences while they work on their outfits and props. Out of the 38 videos, 5 are bodypaint streams, and a few are related to make-up or just chatting in costumes.

In other words, these streams are very diverse. However, in terms of style, they are similar and not what I expected when I went into this research. Since I had studied many creative cosplay expressions on YouTube before, I anticipated that the streams themselves would be creative and might function as sites of in-character play. Since it is increasingly common for conventions to stream competitions on Twitch, I expected more performances at conventions, in hotels and elsewhere. Although the study coincided with several small conventions in Europe, there was little evidence of this being documented.

However, most streams were awfully mundane and showed the cosplayers (usually from the waist up) chatting and/or working in private spaces. This privacy seems purposely decorated in some cases, where the items in view and backgrounds are clearly arranged as a small set. These spaces are largely domestic, and never in public or outdoors, perhaps because of the elaborate set-up Twitch streaming requires. Most streamers sit down, and audiences hardly ever see their full body or attire. The streams give insights into how cosplay is constructed and made, how make-up is done, and in the cosplay community. However, there is not that much discussion of characters and stories, as I will highlight below.

CREATIVITY AND MAKING

The content on Twitch that involves costumes and dressing up is highly diverse. In general, costumes on Twitch can have different functions—they can add flavor to a stream, like in table-top role-playing or in a let's play. In these cases, costumes symbolize geek culture or create a deeper connection to a game. In the sampled streams, however, these narrative connections are slightly different, since most streams that are tagged as "cosplay" are not about adding to an existing narrative or transforming it. For instance, streamers are usually not in character, or only momentarily, but rather act as experts and fellow fans that audiences like to hang out with and get tips from. The selected streams are highly interactive, in the sense that the audience often steers the discussion through commentary on the chat. In this sense, the input and comments of the audience act as a paratext within a paratext (a commentary on commentary), thus creating a layered textual experience.

Maker culture is a key theme in many of the selected videos. Streamers discuss cosplaying deeply, and videos become a highly visual way of documenting the craft and costumes. These videos reveal more about the dimensions of the hobby that fans do not normally see—how costumes and props are created, how bodies are transformed and dressed up. In other words, Twitch reveals the material, creative culture behind cosplay—a system where different (non-human) actors come together, from sewing machines, buttons, and fabrics to the Twitch interface, its channels, and the viewers.

In terms of cosplay creation, most streamers either create parts of outfits or props. There are no videos about wig styling or other activities related to

cosplay creation in this corpus. One example is MaulCosplay, a male German creative, who works on a fake gun.[38] He explains what he does and interacts with his audience. Unlike many of the female streamers, he is not dressed up for the occasion. He just wears a casual sweater and is mostly busy crafting in his garage. The background features his tools. The streamer provides tips on different materials and also comments on the tools he uses or picks up. The users comment on his techniques regularly and approve of him putting on safety glasses, or make remarks about using a laser near certain fabrics. Overall, the chat is lively and seems to be a tight-knitted group of people from the German cosplay community, many of whom seem to be cosplayers themselves. They spontaneously initiate plans to get together for an upcoming convention ("EC") with a cyberpunk group.

By using different screens within Twitch, cosplayers often provide a holistic overview of the creation process. Within one channel or window, many cosplayers use at least three screens so that they can zoom in on their work, show themselves, and also show the character or product that they are working on. Of these different screens, usually, two are camera feeds. For instance, eveillecosplay has three screens that show her working on her *World of Warcraft* armor.[39] One is a picture of the character, the other is a webcam that films her from a distance, the other is a zoom on the table where she does her crafting (see figure 1a/b). Eveille is excited to share her work, and often shows details on her work area. While showing her horns from different angles to the camera, she states: "I did some more painting on my horns!"

The different bars used in her stream also show her newest follower, newest subscriber, how much she raised for charity, as well as her name and the cosplay that she is working on. Most cosplay streams use these different options and also play vivid background music while they are creating their outfits. In some streams, the audience can also select the music as well. However, a few streams stand out in their minimalism. Yuzupyon works on her Motoko (*Ghost in the Shell*) cosplay with one screen. Her stream is beautifully staged with soft pink and blue props, fairy lights in the back, and

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38 MaulCosplay: "Ich geh kaputt! Ich bin schon wieder da! (Teilweise)," January 18, 2020; https://www.twitch.tv/videos/537891851

39 eveillecosplay: "Armor Making—Ysera—WoW—Design by SunsetDragon— Any Donations Going to AUS Wildfire Aid !social," January 18, 2020; https://www.twitch.tv/videos/538029471

different guns that she most likely created herself.[40] It draws more average viewers (varied between 80-98 during the hour I watched the stream) than most channels that I watched (see table 2). Overall, most streams that drew high numbers and a broader audience were bodypaint videos rather than the creation videos. The fact that Yuzu's stream stands out might be related to her presence, her status as a cosplayer, but I would not be surprised if the staging of her stream also has something to do with her viewership.

While Yuzu is clearly often concentrating on creating her patterns, she often looks up at the stream briefly. She is an honest cosplayer who also admits that she is sometimes experimenting. Sometimes, it is the audience teaching the cosplayer rather than the other way around. When Yuzu uses a soft silk that sticks to the machine and nearly ruins her fabric, the audience helps her in this crisis. They provide tips, like sharpening the needle, covering the base with a different fabric, or using tissue paper below the fabric. Literacy has a different role in these streams than in tutorials. The streamer does not always act as the authority and has conversations with the audience on techniques and practices. They are in this together.

None of the streamers that I analyzed truly presents themselves as an authority who consistently explains things. Some provide commentary on their practices, but they are more focused on showing their results and ways of working. In so far as these streams present an affinity space and knowledge community, it is always in the context of streamers and audiences having a productive discussion together, at least in the streams that were analyzed for this study.

This struck me as particularly unique to Twitch, compared to other online cosplay practices. It seems that audiences turn to Twitch less for help, and more for insights, inspiration, ideas, and a sense of community. Many viewers also discuss their own current projects and showcasing their experience in the cosplay community.

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40 Yuzupyon: "Motoko cosplay making !discord to chat after streams Ich geh kaputt! February 20, 2020; https://www.twitch.tv/videos/555042500

Figure 1a/b: Comparison of streaming set-up of eveillecosplay & yuzupyon
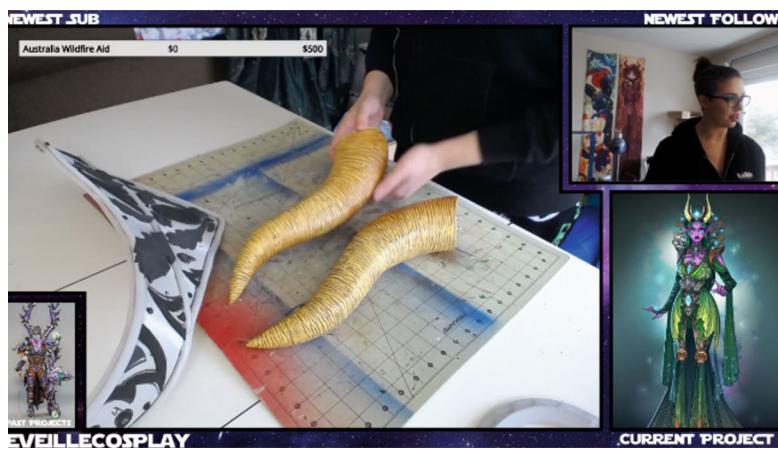
Source: eveillecosplay: "Armor Making—Ysera—WoW—Design by SunsetDragon —Any Donations Going to AUS Wildfire Aid !social," January 18, 2020; https://www.twitch.tv/videos/538029471; Screenshot by N. Lamerichs

Source: Stream by Yuzupyon: "Motoko cosplay making !discord to chat after streams," February 20, 2020; https://www.twitch.tv/yuzupyon/videos; Screenshot by N. Lamerichs

Affective Performances and Gender

Streaming offers viewers an intimate look into a person's life and hobbies. Through the chat, connections are formed with the streamer, which gives an idea of closeness. In cosplay, this aspect of streaming is amplified, because costuming is always connected to the body of the streamer, who tries on the outfit, or sews their outfit or commission actively while just chatting away. The streams that I analyzed support this idea of intimacy, and evoke it in their shots and mise-en-scène. The videos in this corpus are seemingly shot from offices, living rooms, bedrooms, or garages. Even when these videos are shot in a make-shift studio, they tend to convey the streamer's personality.

With a few exceptions, most of the streams that were sampled for this research were by female streamers with different national backgrounds and sexualities, one important finding already is that men stream cosplay far less on Twitch, or do not make use of the hashtags as much as women. However, when browsing different role-playing tags, it is common to find men dressing up as well to represent different characters, particularly in table-top sessions. Men are also well-represented in the Making & Crafting category, but their practices are diverse. One exploratory search of category (4 March 2020, 11:30) shows 34 streams in which men are well-represented, painting *Dungeons & Dragons* figurines, glass blowing, and 3-D printing different objects, such as a Baby Yoda figurine.

The cosplay performances on Twitch are not neutral but characterized by friendly conversation and even intimacy. A good example of these intimate performances is Andy Rae's (Andyraecosplay) *Attack on Titan* bodypaint.[41] In this 9+ hours stream, the female streamer paints herself as the character Anne in front of the camera slowly, by drawing different muscles and flesh. The background is carefully arranged to fit the cosplay. There are candles arranged on a table in the background, and viewers see a backdrop of the famous walls from the anime and manga. As Andy Rae mindfully puts on the grime and accentuates the colors, she discusses everything from cosplay to her life with her audience. She is attentive of the camera and friendly with the people in the chat. Many of her jokes revolve around her being Canadian,

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41 Andyraecosplay: "Attack on Titan Female Titan Body Paint!!! First time doing organic paint blehhhh," January 18, 2020; https://www.twitch.tv/videos/537256239

and she sometimes exaggerates her accent. Seeing her put the paint on her skin is a delicate, intimate experience. When people make remarks about nudity and the Twitch guidelines, she laughs and comments jokingly that her muscles are indeed not paint: "Haha, yeah, I just ripped my skin off tonight!"

Figure 2: Andryraecosplay in bodypaint as Anne from Attack on Titan
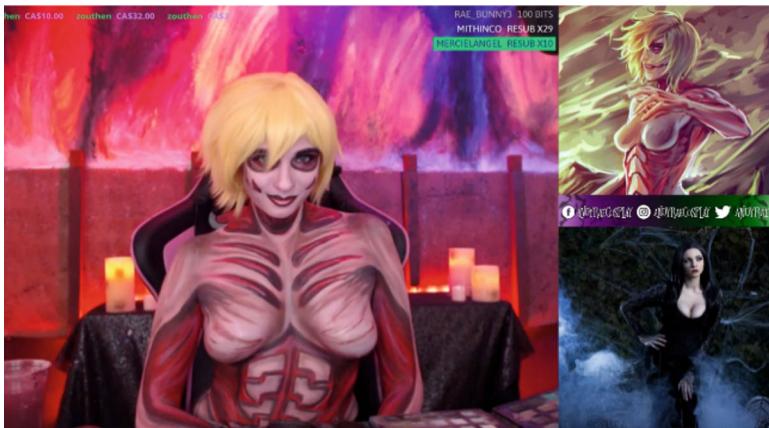
Source: Stream by Andyraecosplay: "Attack on Titan Female Titan Body Paint!!! First time doing organic paint blehhhh," January 18, 2020; https://www.twitch.tv/videos/537256239; Screenshot by N. Lamerichs

While Andy Rae puts on her grime, the audience compliments her often with her body and appearance. She is positive and takes their compliments in good spirit. Some of the viewers express their own doubts about doing bodypaints. User EleeMoon for instance worries about her own body and skin tone: "Bodypainting cosplays always look so good, i wish my body was toned enough for that <3" Andy Rae responds: "No honey, my body is not toned at all! I drew on it! It's an illusion!" Once the bodypaint is done (see figure 2), the audience is highly supportive of the cosplayer. One user (Ty_theBlockbuster_Guy) remarks: "u broke twitch by your awesomeness." Many state how amazing Andy Rae looks, and how happy they are to see the final product. To all their hearts and compliments, Rae remarks: "Aw thank you, wish I could come eat your family!" Andy Rae is expressive in her gestures and playful towards the camera, showing her appreciation to the audience but also throwing in some in-character jokes.

For the most part, the sessions on Twitch are an intimate back and forth between the streamer and audience, that is often tagged under the category Just Chatting. Conversations were mostly friendly and playful, which argues against the idea that Twitch is a platform where toxic masculinity is normalized. When viewers acted out of line, they were banned, but I only saw a streamer call out a viewer once in my hours of viewing. In general, these cosplay streams are watched by low numbers of viewers, who seem to know each other and often discuss topics unrelated to the stream. In terms of content, many streamers focus on the creation of outfits and props. Cosplay is portrayed as a critical making process, whereas there are only a few streams that focus on other aspects of the hobby, such as photography or convention life. The women that focus on bodypaint and make-up are treated differently than the makers. They receive compliments on beauty, looks and techniques. Even though these female streamers are often told how cute and beautiful they are, they take each compliment with a smile and self-consciously.

While most streams are about creativity and bodypaint, one was also concerned with make-up and photoshoots, namely the German stream by izzy_clary.[42] She quietly paints herself as Poison Ivy while users in the chat talk about new Marvel shows, music, work-life, and their own cosplay projects. One user, BigTunaNeal, discusses her own experience with painting: "I've been working in a lot of delicate low-pressure stuff, like painting in veins and fine skin details." Izzy chats away in German while arranging her wig and doing her make-up for her Poison Ivy cosplay. There is soft piano music in the background—renditions of popular songs like *Country Roads*. This adds to the atmosphere of beauty and cuteness which is so prominent during this stream.

Appearance is discussed elaborately as well. Even though Izzy has orange hair herself, she still wears a wig for her Ivy cosplay. Users approve. Rokua states: "Perücken sind immer besser für Cosplays als eigenes Haar." (Wigs are always better for cosplays than your own hair.) Most interesting about this stream is that once Izzy is dressed up, she also provides insights into how she does her photoshoots for Instagram. She takes a break, rearranges the camera, and shows herself posing in front of a customized forest backdrop as Poison Ivy. As she mentions, the results will be uploaded on her

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42 izzy_clary: "Poison Ivy Rock (GER/ENG)," February 5, 2020, https://m.twitch.tv/izzy_clary/profile

Instagram. One of the users, unnamed_0ne, recognizes the set, and says: "Das sind doch die Backdrops von Kate Backdrops, oder?" (Those are the backdrops of Kate Backdrops, right?) Izzy's performance of her cosplay, and femininity, stand out during the photoshoot and before. It shows that cosplay is firmly embedded in an intertextual web, but also in a culture of self-authorship and curation, and part of a wide social media landscape where young women perform characters and, through those characters, explore their own body, appearance and desires.

Figure 3: Channel of Izzy_Clary posing for her Instagram account

Source: Stream by izzy_clary: "Poison Ivy Rock (GER/ENG)," February 5, 2020; https://m.twitch.tv/izzy_clary/profile; Screenshot by N. Lamerichs

Seeing this stream of a woman alone in her bedroom, staging the best selfies, is an intimate experience. Usually, audiences only see the product and assume that these selfies are taken naturally and without too much effort. However, the careful staging by Izzy shows us that channels like Instagram and Twitch are heavily curated and that looking good requires a lot of effort. The discussions on this stream, from hairdo and make-up, show us that cosplay can be very similar to the beauty vlogs on YouTube and other online performances where young women support each other in Western culture. The many compliments on how good Izzy looks, and how cute she is, confirm

that Twitch is part of a larger cultural paradigm, one where appearance is still an important and gendered norm, and where performance on online channels is an important, deliberate and time-consuming activity for many users. These aesthetics may seem natural and unfiltered, but they are staged through much effort. A Twitch stream, in that sense, may seem more raw but is also carefully constructed.

FEMALE FANTREPRENEURS

Twitch can be read as affective labor, as the previous section clearly frames. Woodcock and Johnson describe this immaterial, emotional form of investment by streamers as "affective dimensions of video game streaming labor, which involves being compelling to watch and friendly to viewers, soliciting donations, building parasocial intimacy with spectators, and engaging audiences through humor."[43] Still, Twitch's business model encourages actual monetization through the affiliate/partner roles. By broadcasting their creative labor and photoshoots, streamers earn revenue, which is portrayed as a coveted position, a holy grail of sorts, on Twitch. Though streamers engage in what is de facto their hobby (e.g., cosplay, gaming), they combine this with actual material and immaterial labor. Julian Kücklich describes such practices as "playbor," the integration of play with often invisible, precarious labor.[44] On Twitch, material labor and monetization come in different forms and do not only relate to the affiliate/partner scheme.

For starters, Twitch is often part of a larger identity of cosplayers as "fantrepreneurs." In this model, fan activities such as cosplay become an opportunity to sell to other fans and create revenue. During this research, I watched different streams of Lilsproutstudios, who shows her work on different items from THE LEGEND OF ZELDA franchise and WORLD OF WARCRAFT. She uses

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43 Woodcock, Jamie/Johnson, Mark: "The Affective Labor and Performance of Live Streaming on Twitch.tv," in: *Television & New Media*, 20(8) (2019), pp. 813-823.

44 Kücklich, Julian: "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry," *The Fibreculture Journal 5* (2005); http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-02 5-precarious-playbour

the channel to draw attention to the Etsy store where she sells her products.[45] In her stream, for instance, she talks elaborately about her new inventory, and how many of her hand-made items were sold out as holiday gifts during Christmas. Her hand-made items are sold on Etsy, where the hearthstone replica is for instance sold for $41,90 (March 6, 2020). A quick search also tells me that this vendor actively promotes her sculptures and replicas on Twitter and elsewhere. This cross-channel approach is crucial for fantrepreneurs in terms of marketing and promotion.

Other streamers particularly specialize in cosplay commissions as freelancers, such as lowbudgetcos.[46] This German cosplayer uses her stream to show commissions that she is working on, such as a Kalluto cosplay. She thanks the user in question for commissioning the outfit with her, and for allowing her to stream the creative process. She remarks: "Wenn du Zeit hast, kannst Du gucken," and adds with a laugh: "Ich lass dich sehen, wie das funktioniert, der ganze Kram!" (If you have time, you can watch, I'll show you how it works, all the things!) It seems that users in the chat are on friendly terms and probably acquaintances. When they comment on the cosplay creation, it is usually to complement the fabrics and design choices or other details, like: "Der Knopf hat eine schöne Farbe" (The button has a beautiful color.)

While certain streamers can earn revenues through the before-mentioned affiliate/partner schemes, it is also possible to set up donations and tips within the stream for viewers. Donation or tip buttons were very common in the cosplay streams that I watched. It seems that most streamers currently use Streamlabs for this purpose, which utilizes both credit cards and PayPal. Embedded in the streams, most show the most recent donations, their top donation/donator, the overall donations that they gathered and/or the goals that they strive for. Often, donations have a certain purpose, such as gathering enough money for a certain cosplay or gathering money to go to a specific event (e.g., Twitchcon).

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45 lilsproutstudios: "More Kokiri's Emerald sculpting!! {LoZ - Ocarina of Time." January 27, 2020; https://www.twitch.tv/lilsproutstudios/clip/HappyLongAlfalfa BudBlast

46 lowbudgetcos: "(GER) Es wird...ein Oberteil | !wip !links." January 22, 2020; https://m.twitch.tv/lowbudgetcos/profile

Figure 4: ThatsStrange collects donations with her bodypaint to go to Twitchcon EU
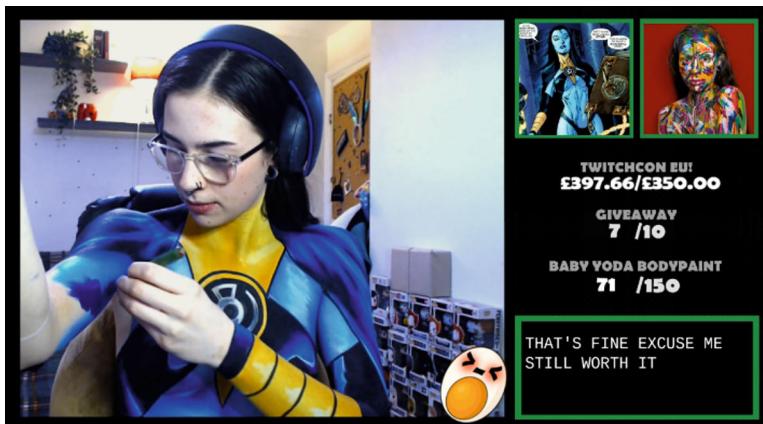
Source: Screenshot from a stream by ThatsStrange: "LYSSA DRAK GREEN LANTERN BODYPAINT, [Goals! Prints]," January 27, 2020; https://www.twitch.tv/videos/542599198; Screenshot by N. Lamerichs

Finally, donations on Twitch need not necessarily go to the streamer but can also go to a cause. Charity is an important aspect of many streams. During the time of this research in early 2020, Australia was subjected to massive forest fires that were a cause of concern. From the streams that I sampled, eveillecosplay actively gathered donations for the AUS Wildfire Aid with a stream of her WORLD OF WARCRAFT armor.[47]

CONCLUSION

Twitch is a platform where paratexts become texts, spawning new paratexts along the way. When analyzing these streams, we can observe how fan identity is explored, performed, documented, and experienced in many ways. In this chapter, I shed light on the particularities of one tag on Twitch (cosplay) and the types of content that circulated in this category. This case study provided insights into the broader culture of streaming on the Twitch platform,

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47 eveillecosplay: "Armor Making."

specifically the creative processes, transparency into fandom, but also the emotional and gendered labor of being engaging.

These paratexts are by no means neutral but are firmly embedded in the culture of the platform and media culture at large. Cosplay streams are exemplary of the complex communication and parasocial relationships that take place on Twitch as a system. As a network, Twitch thrives on different actors, including aspects of the technology itself. It can be understood as a complex system with actors that range from the streamer, the game, and the audience to the affordances of Twitch and specific streaming software utilized by users. That software, from Twitch Studio to OBS, again has different options and plug-ins to embed donations, extra windows, and banners that, in turn, shape the video content. Twitch is a potpourri of texts, most of which are ephemeral in nature, which also poses challenges for researchers.

In the case of cosplay, a specific transformative and embodied fan identity is staged and amplified on Twitch. The streams provide insights into the creative processes around cosplay, its maker culture, as well as its beauty culture. Most of the streamers in this corpus are female, and engaged with their community in intimate ways, staging affective parasocial relationships that sometimes cut across language and cultural differences (e.g., some streams were bilingual). However, for the most part, their audiences seemed homogenous groups of friends and acquaintances that had other forms of relationships as well, those of vendors and buyers, seamstress and commissioner, artist and patron. Many of the users had fandom relationships that extended to conventions and other spaces. Twitch, in this sense, extrapolates certain fan identities and gives a platform to extend them. In most cases, Twitch contributes to the larger personal brand that cosplayers also communicate, perform, and possibly monetize on other channels, such as Instagram, Twitter and Etsy.

Theorizing these different expressions is crucial in fan and game studies today. The concepts that we use to close-read these expressions, such as paratextuality, need to be adapted and examined anew to understand the complex interfaces, texts, and commentaries that circulate in digital culture. The theory of paratext needs to be revised to fully understand contemporary digital culture, user-generated content and automation processes. To capture platform fandom, we need to look beyond individual texts and signs, and consider these texts as a system.

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