

UNDERSTANDING MEMETIC MEDIA AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY THROUGH STREAMER PERSONA ON TWITCH.TV

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ABSTRACT

Video game livestreamers on the leading platform Twitch.tv present a carefully curated version of themselves - negotiated in part via interactions with their viewers - resulting in collectively performed personas centred around individual streamers. These collective personas emerge from a combination of live performance, platform features including streamer-specific emoticons and audiovisual overlays, the games that streamers play, and how they play them. In this paper, I interrogate how these elements culminate in a feedback loop between individual streamers and non-streamer participants, specifically how platform features mediate and facilitate interactions between users. I also examine streaming persona as both a product and expression of this dynamic and the subsequent emergence of streamer-based social arrangement and collective value systems. I do this with particular attention to how memes operate uniquely within the livestreaming mode.

KEY WORDS

Livestreaming; Persona; Mimetic Media; Collective Identity; Performance; Video Games

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I define *memesis*¹ – not to be confused with *mimesis* – as the performative process by which Internet users draw upon existing memes to create new memetic media. By examining memesis through two contrasting Twitch streamer case studies – RayNarvaezJr and PaladinAmber – I address the impact of different users on the formation of the streaming persona and stream collective through questions of user agency. Further, I demonstrate how memes appear within games and emerge from them during streams, thereby mediating game-spectator dynamics. Finally, I introduce a temporal layer by linking memesis with the memetic histories of stream collectives.

This analysis is rooted in streamers' performances of persona, interactions with their viewers, and the resulting collective identities that emerge through streams. By understanding the creation of memes as a cultural process linked to collective identity formulation, a new framework for examining digital persona arises. This paper demonstrates how multiple phenomena that occur all over the Internet intersect: memes are built into our online interactions; the sharing of video game content online has developed and sustained enormous followings over the past fifteen years; and online identity – both collective and individual – is constructed and performed online. The arguments I present here generalise well beyond this

context to illuminate dynamics within digital culture around identity construction and content circulation.

TWITCH, PERSONA, AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Online persona can be best understood by recontextualising pre-digital notions of the concept. Marshall (2010) begins this work by mobilising Jung's (1928) and Goffman's (1956) understandings of persona as a product of interactions with an external collective in everyday life. On Twitch, the streaming persona emerges and is reflexively defined through the interactions between the streamer and spectators. Otherwise, also known as impression management, this constitutes a particular form of micro-celebrity (Senft 2008).

As scholarly interest in Twitch grows, studies emphasise that sociality is one of the primary motivations for continued use (Ask et al. 2019; Hilvert-Bruce et al. 2018; Sjöblom and Hamari 2017; Sjöblom et al. 2017). Twitch operates as a social space through a combination of the relationship between active spectators and the streamer-spectator relationship (Bingham 2020; Chen and Lin 2018). As such, participatory communities emerge with the streaming persona at their core (Hamilton et al. 2014). The values presented by the streaming persona are thus reflected in the behaviours of members of chat (Consalvo 2018), and I argue that this leads to a collective variation of the streaming persona that is embodied by the streamer but enacted by the entire collective.

Twitch's features enable spectators to perform elements of the streaming persona. Among the most prominent of these are subscriber emotes. Emotes are emoticons specific to Twitch. Streamers can design/commission emotes for their subscribers, who in exchange pay a monthly subscription fee to support the streamer. Emotes form a core component of both the streaming persona and collective vernacular on Twitch (Consalvo 2017; Ford et al. 2017). When spectators communicate using subscriber emotes, they mobilise the streaming persona to create a collective identity. Persona's collective dimension (Moore et al. 2017) emphasises that the performer is not necessarily the sole contributor to the performed persona (Marshall et al. 2020). The synchronous nature of Twitch strengthens the perception of intimacy between users (Johnson and Woodcock 2019), affording streamers a better sense of how content resonates with their audience and enabling them to adjust their performance accordingly. In this way, spectator agency is stronger in livestreaming than in asynchronous digital modes (Scully-Blaker et al. 2017), and so collective identity and persona become negotiations between spectator and streamer agency.

Moore et al. (2017) name the performative as a key dimension underpinning online persona, a conceptualisation that foregrounds the balance between truth and fiction as a performer communicates with their audience. An illusion of authenticity typically accompanies the performance of micro-celebrity (Marwick 2013), although the liveness and long-form nature of livestreams present challenges to a sustained and consistent persona. Despite this, Twitch streamers must still tailor elements of their persona to appeal to their audience (Woodcock and Johnson 2019).

MEMES, AGENCY, AND IDENTITY

The influence of collective agency on streaming personas and the personas' subsequent fluidity bears a striking resemblance to the transformative nature of memes. The transformations that memes undergo subject to collective agency instil memes with an inherent plurality. Shifman captures this plurality in her definition of an Internet meme as "(a) a group of digital items

sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (Shifman 2014, p.41). To clarify what constitutes ‘many users’ in this definition, Milner (2016) notes that media may be considered memetic if it is “consistently shared and innovatively applied”, even among only a small group (p.38). A number of memes discussed in this chapter resonate most strongly within a single streamer collective (in fact, may even be understood completely differently across different groups), so I will rely upon Shifman’s definition with the caveat that there may be limitations on spread.

Memes carry inherited social and political values that can contradict the intention of individual manifestations (Glitsos and Hall 2019; Shifman 2019). These inherited values can be mobilised by streamers to destabilise the existing values of the meme and evoke questions of agency. Agency is essential to the success of a meme and underscores the distinction between an Internet meme and Dawkins’ (2006) original “meme” (Milner 2016; Shifman 2013). Wiggins and Bowers (2015) discuss agency in this context as “characterised by an innate ability to imagine different outcomes”(p.1894). From this emerges their duality of memetic structures, whereby an actor enacts their agency to create a new manifestation of a meme whilst preserving the essence of that meme. This recursive process allows users to encode their contribution with meaning relative to previous contributions and forms a basis for future contributions. Phillips and Milner (2018) refer to this uniqueness-connectivity duality as fixity and novelty, as discussed by Tannen (2007), and via Toelken’s (1996) twin laws of conservatism and dynamism. This ambivalence is central to my account of memetic behaviours and memesis. The creation of memetic media is thus a complex practice of layered intertextuality that contributes to an individual’s identity within their social group (Shifman 2012).

Shifman’s (2014) social logic of participation names the simultaneous active construction of a unique identity and shaping of social networks through memes. This logic applies directly to social interactions on Twitch. Accordingly, a streamer can use memes to define their persona in a way that is unique and relatable, and encourages greater collective participation. There is a growing body of literature demonstrating how memes can be mobilised to construct collective identity and perform boundary work that fluidly informs normative behaviour (Ask and Abidin 2018; Gal et al. 2016; Literat and van den Berg 2019; Phillips and Milner 2018). Alternatively, memes can act as gatekeepers, permitting membership to - and hence validating the agency of - only individuals who demonstrate knowledge of unspoken rules (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). Adhering to normative behaviour through memes - that is, using the ‘correct’ memes in the ‘correct’ ways - lends users credibility. As such, memes become tools for accruing social capital. Streamers operate slightly differently to non-streamer participants here, as the latter generates this social capital within the stream collective while the former sets the standard for the stream collective. However, the streamer also demonstrates their social capital through memes as signals of broader social and cultural awareness.

METHOD

This paper stems from an ongoing ethnographic project examining the construction and performance of streaming personas on Twitch. I draw upon two case studies - RayNarvaezJr (Ray) and PaladinAmber (Amber) - who together demonstrate the diverse ways in which memes are mobilised to reinforce and redefine aspects of streaming personas and the associated collective identities. I draw attention to how these streamers curate their streams, particularly how memes are integrated into streams and emerge from them. The elements of interest include emotes, the stream screen layout, streamer choices in Twitch alerts and

overlays, and the games that they play and how they play them. Taylor refers to much of this as the “set design” of the stream (2018, p.73) and it culminates in streamers’ presentations of persona (Sjoblom et al. 2019). I extend this to more broadly consider memetic decisions that affect the interactions between members of each stream collective and the subsequent collective identity.

RayNarvaerJr

January 2019. Texas-based RayNarvaezJr (Ray) is a little way into his stream of the new Kingdom Hearts III (2019). His facecam sits in the bottom left of the screen, a green screen sets only his body, his chair, and his microphone visible. On the top left of the screen is an event tracker, listing the usernames of his most recent four subscribers and donors. Above this sits his ‘sub train’ and timer, respectively the number of subscriptions that have occurred within five minutes of each other and a countdown until the train resets lest someone else subscribes. Ray is fighting a boss - the Rock Titan from Disney’s Hercules (1997).

‘Oh, we up here now, okay’, Ray says as the protagonist Sora, who is dwarfed by the titan boss, momentarily hovers above the titan’s twin heads before landing between them. After a few seconds of attacking one of the heads, Ray activates an ability.

‘Wait, what does this one say?’

A bright, multi-coloured train of neons and fairy lights appears along rails made of the same. As Sora jumps on board, Ray’s jaw drops and his eyebrows rise in surprise.

‘WHAT?! We’re in a train!’ his voice hits some higher notes as he fires projectiles at the titan and the train chuffs along its rails of light.

‘Oh, hold on!’

He pauses the game. Chat is quickly filling with ‘CHOO CHOO’s and ‘WOO WOO’s as viewers get in on the locomotive action.

‘Gotta do it for the bit’, Ray makes momentary eye contact with the camera as he pulls out a wooden train whistle. As he puts it to his mouth, ready to blow, he looks briefly at it before turning it around, ‘wrong side of the whistle. I’m excited.’

‘We good?’ he says with a nod, left hand holding the whistle to his mouth, right hand on the controller.

He unpauses the game. Sora continues to fire projectiles at the titan from the train, the screen filled with bright lights and firework-esque explosions, and Ray blows into the whistle. Chat fills with Ray’s brownTRAIN emote - a small image of the driver’s car of a brown steam train. He blows the whistle three times, each for four or five seconds. The fourth blow is cut short as he puts the whistle down with a curt ‘That’s the end of that.’

It’s not quite the end, however, as the brownTRAINS continue to chug their way through chat.

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Figure 1. A typical layout of Ray's stream. He blows his train whistle while chat uses the brownTRAIN emote (2019).

Ray² streams a variety of games, and his streaming persona has naturally emerged from his time with Achievement Hunter³. While working there, he produced gameplay videos for distribution on YouTube. Marijuana memes have followed Ray, stemming from his insistence that he would never smoke weed. Five years on from his start as a full-time Twitch streamer, these memes still circulate on his channel. He engages with relevant memes through Twitch alerts – streamer-specific audiovisual clips that play over the stream video to signify events like subscriptions and donations – which allow spectators to enact their agency by directly influencing the timing of these memes.

PaladinAmber

Eight months later, PaladinAmber (Amber) - streaming from Adelaide, Australia - has titled her stream "lessons on 'how not to be an idiot on the internet' starting now". Her stream screen consists of pinks, purples, and soft blues with the appearance of a Windows 98 set up. Her facecam sits inside a Paint window, with the game in a small Notepad window in the upper right-hand corner, and her chat in a slightly larger Notepad window stretched across the lower and mid right-hand side of the screen. Her pink headset with attached cat ears and pink-purple neons lining the floor behind her reinforce the colour scheme. Her camera has been angled to include a large grey Totoro plush (from the 1988 film My Neighbor Totoro). Her microphone reaches in from the right, sitting in frame.

'If you need rules on the Internet,' Amber speaks over an audio clip of the Curb Your Enthusiasm end credits, 'Chances are you probably shouldn't be on the Internet at all. Number one to number ten is "don't be a fucking idiot".'

The stream cuts to black on the word 'fucking'. The Curb Your Enthusiasm credits roll for nearly fifteen seconds.

'Holy shit...I'm in a mood. I'm in a mood today.'

In chat, someone expresses the belief that anyone should be able to say anything without restriction, Amber immediately responds 'Nope. I think that there are fucking restrictions. I think

that you should most definitely, absolutely have restrictions,' she begins using her fingers to count the following as entries on a list.

'If it's harmful, if it's hateful, and if it's not helpful, don't fucking say it. Absolutely don't say it. Absolutely don't say it.' As this comes to an end, she triggers another audiovisual clip meant to emulate the 'Confused Math Lady' meme. Though typically an image-based meme used to connote confusion (sometimes ironically), Amber has added the sound cue of a dial-up tone while mathematical text and images float in front of her face.

As the conversation moves on a few chat members support her comments. They say that it's her stream and she can restrict whatever she wants. But they've missed the point.

'It goes beyond the stream. We've gotta stop doing this to people who are in public eyes. "He was comparing your hair",' she reads a comment, 'Yeah but this is the thing though, out of everyone he chose, he chose [to compare me to] Weird Al Yankovic, who is not the necessarily the most attractive looking male I've ever seen in my life, and he didn't say "hey, your hair is giving me Weird Al Yankovic vibes", he was most certainly talking about my whole physical appearance, and if you think I'm wrong...'

The Math Lady meme has been playing for the second half of this. As it continues, she pulls her microphone close to her mouth.

'I have some fuckin' news for you: you're absolutely wrong. You're absolutely wrong. Do you want to know how I know this? I'm a woman, and I have suffered through years and years of males telling me things and thinking that it's appropriate, and it most certainly is fucking not. Alright.'

'Just don't do it. Stop comparing people to people, it's weird,' after reading a few comments.

A new beat, and Amber is dancing in her chair and speaking quite quickly. The stream feels upbeat, but Amber doesn't call upon any memes to make her point.

'I, honestly, at this point, I just...I love creating content, but here's the thing,' she moves the backs of her hands together and takes a deep breath, interrupts herself reading some comments, and finally says 'I'm a very strong individual, and I'm like - my tolerance level - my tolerance level is like -'

She brings her index finger and thumb together, signifying her dwindling tolerance.

'Ever so thin at the moment with social medias.'

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Amber⁴ became a Twitch partner following a series of viral Tweets in 2019. These Tweets consisted of short stream clips, within which she would confront misogynistic messages from viewers, including questions like 'Are you straight? Bi? Single?' or fetishistic requests to show her feet for donations. The popularity of these clips stemmed from her use of memes and generally humorous approach towards calling out the behaviour. Her relationship with memes extends to producing merchandise proclaiming herself as 'a meme queen', and this appears primarily through carefully selected audiovisual clips that Amber manually triggers in response to stream events, including in-game occurrence and messages from viewers.

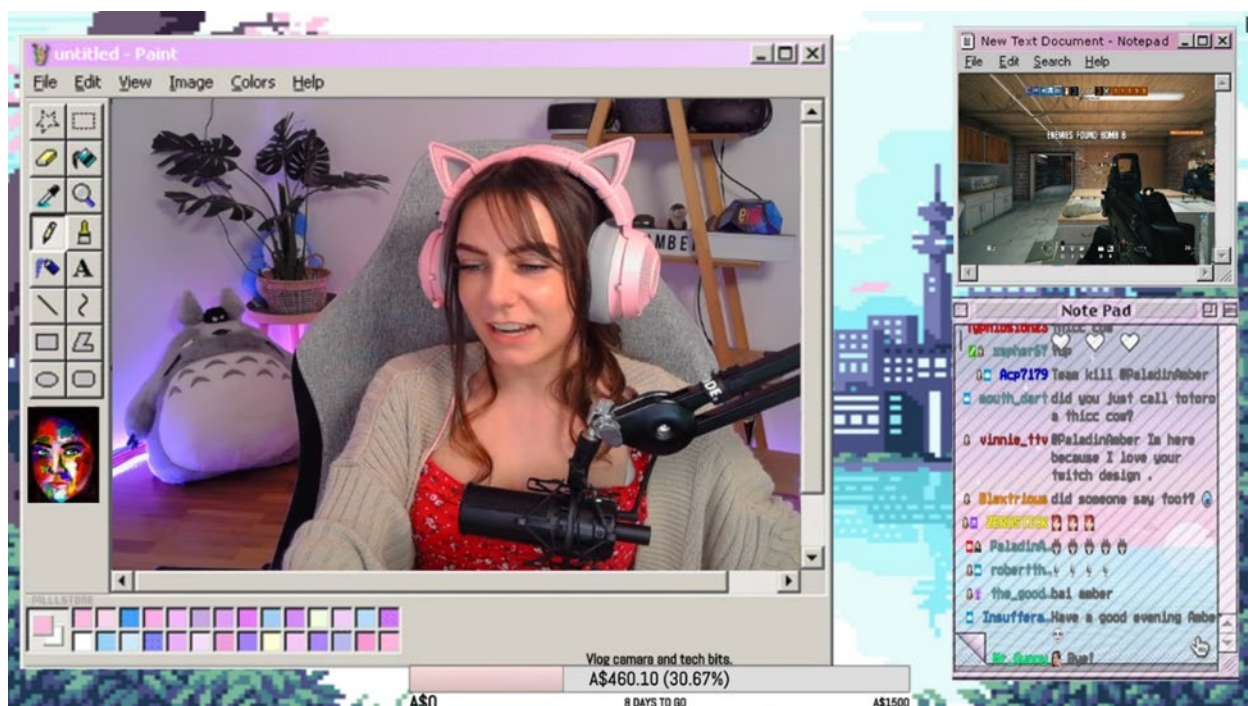


Figure 2. A typical layout of a 'Just Chatting' segment of Amber's stream (2019).

Through these two case studies, it becomes clear how deeply intertwined streaming personas and memetic media can be. The case studies reveal how shared stream culture and associated social practices facilitated by memes contribute towards the sociality that encourages continued stream participation. From this active participation emerges the collective persona, giving streaming personas themselves a memetic quality. Subsequently, questions of agency within streams arise. Streaming personas are negotiations of streamer and spectator agencies, although the balance between the two is not fixed. While the streamer appears to maintain control, their memetic offers must be accepted by other members of the collective in order to maintain their audience.

This paper is structured around a discussion of this fluid collective agency, beginning by separately examining moments when spectator agency is prioritised and then when streamer agency is prioritised. The final two sections emphasise the truly *collective* nature of streams by focusing on instances when agency is more balanced, by explicitly considering the significance of video games and temporality to memetic practices.

MEMESIS

In the previous section, I described moments from Ray's and Amber's streams that may seem unrelated at first. However, these moments resonated with each streamer's audience for a reason deeper than a call to memes. Memes simultaneously become signals of the streamer's digital literacy and the values associated with the streaming persona. These memetic moments are simultaneously serendipitous and planned-for, unique and repeated. This ambivalence motivates my definition of the term *memesis*, a term designed to capture the unique aspects of identity formation and sociality performances arising from the use of memes.

Memes are loaded with meaning and values, and when called upon, these blend with the context under which the meme appears to create new meanings. In livestreams this process – *memesis* – is rendered visible, as the liveness and interactive nature of Twitch streams deny the time required to create new memetic media. Further, the text-based chat (where links are often

prohibited) discourages common meme formats. Thus, memes propagate differently within livestreams to other settings. Any prepared content, like alerts or emotes, must be versatile enough to maintain relevance in a variety of scenarios. By focusing on the subsequently visible *process* of selecting and employing particular memes, I use memesis to decentre the meme as a product. This also serves to highlight memes' social functions as virtual signals of social capital, and contributors towards collective identity and values.

A portmanteau of 'meme' and 'mimesis', *memesis* is the act of creating something memetic. The conceptual and linguistic relationship here begins with the birth of the word "meme", which Dawkins derived from "mimeme" (2006, p. 192). In the context of Internet memes, Shifman emphasises memes as mimetic through the memetic practice of remixing (2014, p. 22). Memes are "concrete speech acts" (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017, p.498), and therefore their creation is a performative act. As such, I coin memesis here to name the performativity engaged by drawing upon existing memes in order to create new memetic media, either through new manifestations of existing memes or entirely new memes.

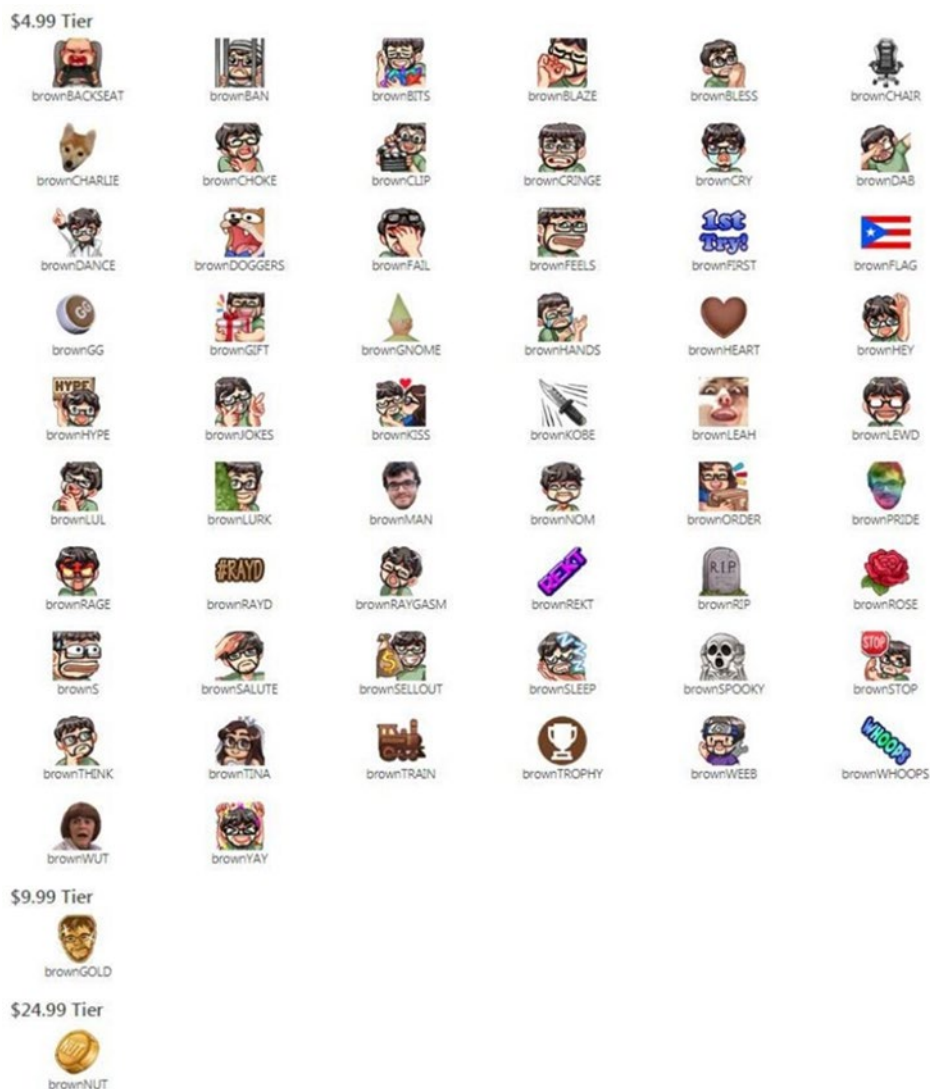


Figure 3. A collection of Ray's Twitch emotes.⁵

Through the remainder of this paper, I demonstrate how memesis operates through Ray's and Amber's streaming practices. These streamers have been chosen as illustrative examples of practices that occur across the platform, and this paper acts as an introduction to a

wider conceptual project. In this section, I examine memesis as it defines Ray's and Amber's streaming personas and the associated collective identities, as well as how memes function as generators of social capital within their collectives. In both cases, I refer to memesis within livestreams as a two-step process – preparation and execution – and compare how it shifts in nature based on whether either streamer or spectator agency is prioritised. The execution can be enacted by either the streamer or spectators, and while most streams – including Ray's and Amber's – see a combination of both, the discussion that follows highlights the contrasting dynamics underpinning memesis in this second stage.

Ray and Memesis Performed by Spectators

One of the core tenets of the production of memetic media is the potential for many people to engage with and produce their iterations of a meme. Memesis that spectators perform prioritises spectator agency over streamer agency. This type of memesis is prominent in Ray's streams and is most clear when he makes a memetic offer in response to a stream or game occurrence, which is taken up by chat members. In terms of the two steps of memesis, preparation is performed by the streamer, but execution is in the hands of the collective audience. This social acceptance is an essential component of memetic diffusion (Spitzberg 2014), and feeds into memes as social capital.

In the occurrence described earlier in this paper, Ray responds to the in-game appearance of a train by pulling out and blowing on a wooden train whistle (Figure 3). While he uses this whistle when trains appear in games, its primary use is when the sub train⁵ becomes large. Not only is the sub train a memetic stream feature, being incorporated into many popular streams, but trains are also associated with the 'hype train' meme – a phrase for collective anticipation and excitement. So, when Ray blows on this whistle, he makes a memetic offer, which is accepted by the collective when they respond with brownTRAINS (Figure 3) in chat. This chat reaction becomes an indication of collective hype.

Given that subscriptions require payment (of at least US\$5) and brownTRAIN is an emote accessible only to Ray's subscribers, the hype is simultaneously a celebration of collective growth and Ray's economic success on the platform, as well as the contribution of his viewers to that success. The sub train becomes a cooperative effort where viewers time their subscriptions to keep the train going for as long as possible. Consequently, a strengthened sense of community is facilitated by the streaming persona and expressed through that persona using the brownTRAIN emote. The emote becomes a signal of collective membership and a memetic expression of the streaming persona. The ever-present timer on Ray's stream capitalises Twitch's liveness, which is already tied closely to the economics of the platform (Johnson and Woodcock 2019; Partin 2019).

Going a step further, in 2020 Twitch introduced a feature called the Hype Train - undoubtedly named memetically. Upon receipt of a variable number of bits⁶ and subscriptions within a particular timeframe, the Hype Train begins. Viewers 'build hype' by donating and subscribing while a timer ticks down. Despite demonstrating disdain for Hype Trains (referring to them as 'scam trains'), Ray has crafted a specific overlay for Hype Trains. This overlay includes Vengaboys' "We like to Party!" on loop and a cartoon graphic of Ray and his wife riding a train across the screen. Memesis here again links the economics of the platform to performances of persona as members of the collective collaborate to trigger and maximise the Hype Train. The choices that Ray makes in how he performs the Hype Train are important, considering 'scam train' discourse. To fully engage in a practice transparently designed to control users' spending patterns without acknowledging his own complicity would be in poor taste. However, the exaggerated over-commitment reads as a memetic parody, which generates

social capital. Hype Trains explicitly raise questions around financially gatekeeping participation and elicit a sense of how users perform in exchange for capital, and how memes relate to social and economic capital.

Another meme-theme that has become part of Ray's streaming persona, and that will be revisited in more detail, involves weed. One of Ray's emotes, brownBLAZE (Figure 3), depicts Ray pretending to smoke a joint - the pretence being central to Ray's engagement with weed memes, which originated from the claim that it was something he would never do. Memes are dually concrete speech acts and vernacular (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017) and emotes echo this social function. Gestural emotes like brownBLAZE are virtual speech acts, allowing subscribers to participate by virtually performing the gesture in response to other weed memes appearing within Ray's stream.

When streamers bring memes into the live(streamed) setting of Twitch, and they are taken up by the collective viewership, the memes become part of the streaming persona expressible by both the streamer and the viewers. The streaming persona operates as a negotiation between streamer and spectator agencies. This is, in part, inherited from that same negotiation that occurs through memesis. Thus, the streaming persona becomes a product of collective agency. In fact, Scully-Blaker et al. (2017) observe this tendency when they identify Twitch as a site of "tandem play" (p. 2026) between the streamer and spectators. By merely being, the audience contributes to the stream, and as spectators become more active, this impact becomes greater. Through memesis, the streamer and the collective work in tandem to produce a memetic streaming persona, as is the case with Ray and his use of trains and weed.

Amber and Memesis Led by the Streamer

Amber exemplified streamer-led memesis by focusing heavily upon a range of memetic overlays. Many of these overlays are mobilised to promote desirable values among the stream collective by addressing and correcting undesirable behaviour. In this way, Amber's memesis operates as an instructive tool for moderation that ultimately leads to a self-moderating collective. She employs new memes and existing memes, some of which occur uniquely in response to messages from members of chat, while others are employed in response to game occurrences or things that she says herself. Memes punctuate Amber's stream, producing a persona that resists hegemonic masculinity and misogyny on the platform (and within game culture more generally), whilst also performing femininity in ways that operate both within and against stereotypical models of gender performance.

The moment presented in this paper's methodology is one of many instances of Amber's integration of memesis into her streaming practice. Amber has used memes to respond to viewers questioning her sexuality and relationship status and to men warning her that she ought to start a family before her eggs 'dry up'. These moments share memesis as moderation and collective value setting. The general strategy of education as moderation is effective (Cai and Wohn 2019), with reactive bans being short-term deterrents (Seering et al. 2017). Through an education-first approach, Amber allows offenders to amend their behaviour before she removes them, in the process creating entertaining content out of breaches and building social capital among viewers through a willingness to give second chances.

There is an ambivalence surrounding the boundary work that Amber's overlays perform. Namely, the undesirable behaviour must continue to provide stimulus for the memetic performances that discourage it. In other words, the boundary work itself is visible only because the undesirable behaviour that it explicitly rejects persists. On the other hand, since Amber maintains control over the preparation *and* the execution steps of memesis, her agency is

prioritised, and she can opt to attend to whichever comments she chooses. Looking again at the introductory example, chat comments both supported Amber and contradicted her. This marks an important separation between Ray and Amber, as in Amber's stream the values of the collective (and streaming persona) are being demarcated both through the roles of 'insider' and 'outsider' within the collective.

In the introductory example, Amber uses two of her memetic overlays. The first involves about ten seconds of the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* theme song, after which the screen cuts from her facecam to the credits of the show. This meme trades on the show's awkward tone to emphasise similarly awkward or cringe-worthy moments. She uses this overlay to address cringe-worthy comments from viewers, as well as particularly bad failures in games. The second is a manifestation of the Confused Math Lady Meme (usually a reaction meme of a woman surrounded by mathematical text used to convey confusion) and Amber has created a live version of this meme with mathematical text moving over a close-up (Figure 4). These manifestations are strongly rooted in the referent meme, clearly communicating Amber's intended tone when memesis is performed.

What is particularly striking about Amber's use of these memes is how they have become part of her stream vernacular. She integrates them seamlessly into the stream, and they become part of her persona. However, she is also selective about their use. They punctuate the stream, providing a rhythm for viewers to follow. When she finds a point that she wants to hit home, Amber speaks without drawing upon these memes. Removing the intertextuality of memes, as well as their function as punctuation that increases the pace of the stream, creates the impression of more direct and meaningful streamer-spectator communication. This happens at the end of my example introducing Amber, where the lack of memesis implies greater authenticity. Not only does the use of memes inform the streamer-collective relationship, but the lack thereof also bears significance. In her work on race and digital gaming spaces, Kishonna L. Gray has identified that the mere presence of people of colour in these spaces is read as an act of deviance in the face of their hegemonic whiteness (Gray 2014, 2017). This deviant status can be extended to anyone falling outside of the default (white and male) user category in online gaming spaces (Chess 2017; Taylor 2018). In this case, Amber's status as a woman immediately categorises her as deviant, and she is doubly so when she explicitly mobilises memes to reject the platform's hegemonic masculinity.

This use of memes as stream vernacular is also significant as it relates to the distribution of social capital within the livestreaming format more broadly. Although the preparation stage of memesis occurs asynchronously, the execution must be synchronous. This separates the mode from others such as YouTube videos, or posts on platforms like Twitter and Instagram. There is an improvisational quality to memesis within livestreams, and so a streamer must be sensitive towards what resonates with their audience and what does not. While most viewers are unlikely to notice an occasional memetic misfire – accidentally triggering the wrong audiovisual overlay can receive a positive response – a pattern can damage the social capital that successful memesis has accrued.

Another example of Amber's memesis demonstrating her deviance is her use of 'simping'. Simpung, one of many examples of misogyny on the Internet, is a pejorative term describing a man (simp) going out of his way to accommodate the (emotional) needs of women purely for the sake of sex or a relationship. Amber has co-opted the term, maintaining the core meaning but altering the connotations. She uses the term positively as a way of sharing platonic love and admiration. This represents her work as a streamer, albeit on a smaller scale: she identifies problematic terms and gestures, and attempts to reframe them more positively. Here,

this means changing the diminutive interpretation of simping to an uplifting one. As of December 2020, Twitch has banned the word “simp”, however Amber’s subversive approach still bears significance to the culture of the platform. By prioritising her agency in the execution of memesis like this, Amber can explicitly perform her persona and produce an associated collective that rejects the dominant (cis-hetero white male) values of the platform.

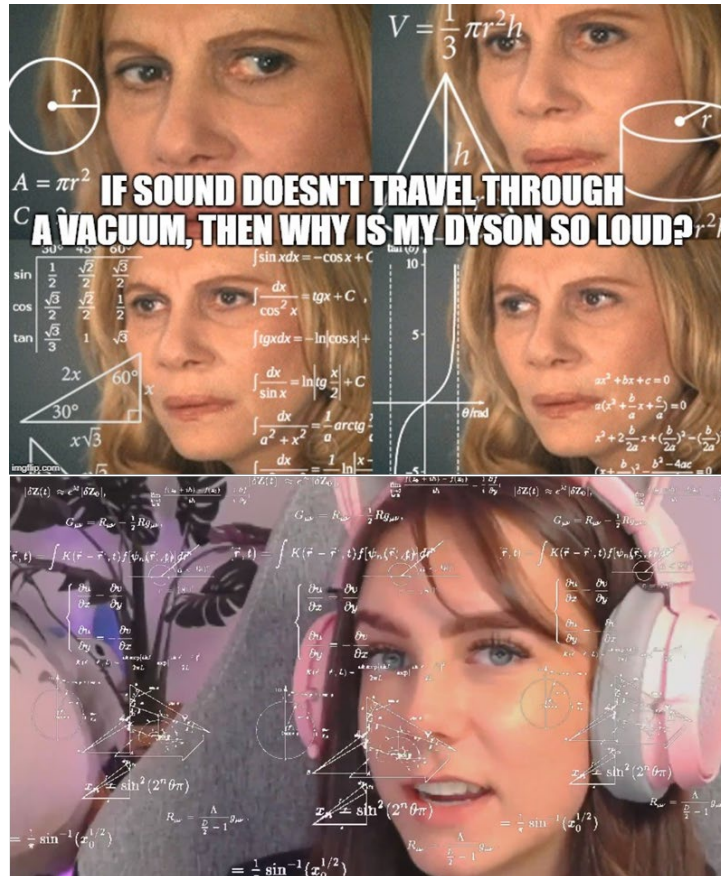


Figure 4. An example of the Confused Lady (top) and a screenshot of Amber’s variation (bottom).

MEMESIS AND VIDEO GAMES

With the strong focus on video game livestreaming on Twitch, videogame play is deeply embedded in the persona of the streamer and the associated collective identity. During play, memesis occurs both when memes are integrated into game play and when they emerge from game content, both reflecting and contributing towards the streaming persona. As the game provides stimulus external to all users, memesis here allows both streamer and spectators to enact their agency at different times.

W33DGOD (pronounced weedgod) is a recurring avatar of Ray’s that demonstrates how the integration of weed memes into his persona has sprouted new memes. In January 2016, Ray played *Pokémon Red Version* (1996) on stream. As part of this game, the player collects a team of Pokémon to accompany them along their journey. When Ray caught the plant Pokémon Vileplume, he nicknamed it ‘WEEDGOD!!!’ as recommended by a member of the chat. Two months later, when creating his customisable character in *Stardew Valley*, Ray named him ‘W33DGOD!!!’ and ended up with a template for W33DGOD: a green afro, sunglasses, a tuxedo top, and red pants. These elements culminate in a unique memetic expression of Ray’s persona. The visual dissonance signifies Ray’s sense of humour, and the green hair and name allude to

weed memes. The tuxedo is a throwback to an avatar he used in *Minecraft* videos with Achievement Hunter, and the red pants are based on a pair that he physically owns (as he states when first creating the character). This meme is a communication tool intrinsically bound to Ray and as it spreads, so does his persona. This character has since appeared in many different games Ray has played (Figure 5) and has spread beyond Twitch. Ray's fans have produced W33DGOD fanart, an example of memetic diffusion (Figure 6). Through this fanart, Ray's followers signal their identification with Ray's streaming persona and collective.

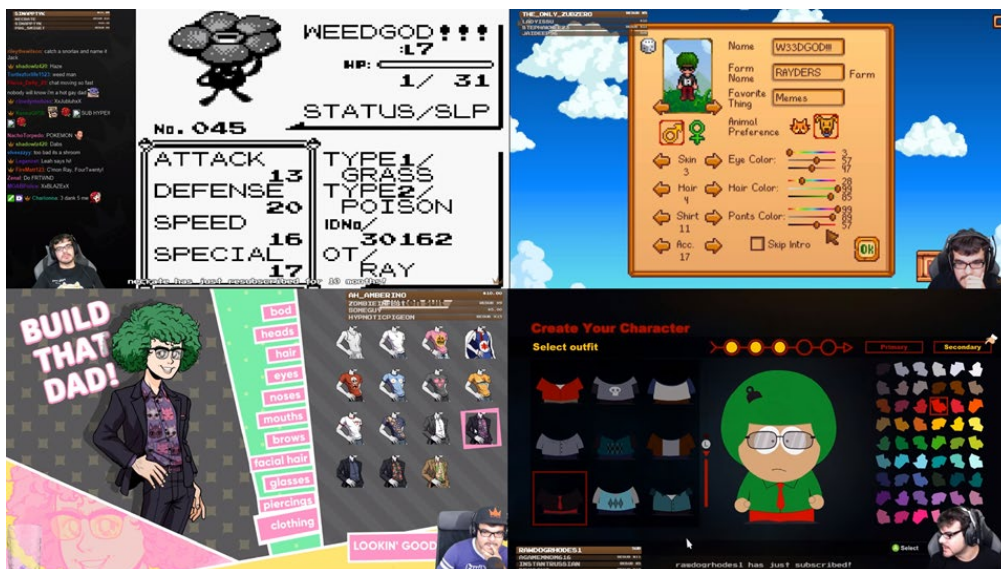


Figure 5. Appearances of W33DGOD in *Pokémon Red Version* (2016), *Stardew Valley* (2016), *Dream Daddy* (2017), and *South Park: The Stick of Truth* (2016).



Figure 6. Fanmade appearances of W33DGOD on DeviantArt⁸ and Twitter⁹

While Ray has created a new meme, Amber has integrated existing memes from her stream into her playthrough of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020). In this game, the player is tasked with inhabiting a deserted island, eventually developing it into a bustling neighbourhood. It is highly customisable, and Amber has regularly enacted memesis through the choices that she made. She named her island 'simptopia', a haven for simps under her alternative connotations of the term. Further, when tasked with creating an island tune - an eight-beat sound clip that plays when speaking to villagers - she recreated the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* theme by ear (Figure 7). By incorporating these elements of her streaming persona into her play, the gameplay becomes a more collective experience, even if just one person is playing.

Simping made another appearance in Amber's stream when she played *Among Us* (2018) with viewers. The game's premise is straightforward: players are crewmates on a (space)ship and must move around the ship performing simple tasks to keep it running. A designated number of players are randomly chosen to be imposters who kill crewmates. Once a body is found, the players have a conversation to deduce who is an imposter. A vote then takes place, and if one person is voted for by the majority, they are ejected into the vacuum of space. During one round, a viewer followed Amber around the ship. This spooked her, so she called an emergency meeting and had the rest of the crew vote this person off the ship. It turned out that this player was not an imposter, and so Amber apologised profusely to them, saying that they were 'just simping'. Memesis is naturally incorporated into Amber's streaming persona and it strengthens the streamer-spectator bond. However, this instance unveils a potential issue with this kind of memesis. If a viewer was not familiar with the recontextualisation of the term within this collective, the reading of this moment would shift substantially. Under this alternate reading, the joke's subject goes from Amber's misreading of the viewer's play to this viewer's 'simp' status. This indicates that the collective identity is also defined by familiarity with the streaming persona, and fluency in the stream vernacular.



Figure 7. Amber finalising her island theme in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020).

MEMETIC HISTORIES

As seen from the array of examples of memes used by Amber and Ray, memesis is highly influential in the creation and evolution of collective identity on Twitch. Some of the memes in this paper have been consistently present for a year or longer, others see fewer references, and others have disappeared entirely from the consciousness of the stream collective from which they emerged. This temporality echoes the general behaviour of Internet memes, varying drastically from the longevity associated with Dawkins' original conception (2006).

This leads to the concept of *memetic history*. The memetic history of a stream is the history of memesis within an individual stream collective's memory. This became significant to me when I was present for a reference to a joke that appeared in a couple of streams months earlier. I understood the joke because not only had I been present for its initial telling in the stream, but also witnessed its retelling in subsequent streams. My membership to that stream collective felt solidified by that sense of shared history between myself and the other members who shared in the joke. The notion of memetic history adds an important temporal layer to memesis as a method of active participation and collective identity. It suggests that intensities of viewing and membership duration contribute to a connectedness within the collective. Twitch viewers that engage more frequently and over a longer period develop a richer sense of the values at the community's core. Conversely, this complicates the nature of stream collectives, as it can often mean that any period of absence creates a disconnect between viewer and collective.

Examining a streamer's memetic history can give a sense of the trajectory of the streaming persona - identifying how it has evolved and how this evolution is a product of interactions between members of the collective. By looking beyond the memes that appear within streams to their longevity within the collective, the streaming persona's characterisation emerges. For instance, Amber's memetic history suggests a collective centred on her identity as a female streamer, as well as an overarching feminist agenda that supports women's right to exist on the Internet without harassment or sexualisation. On the other hand, Ray's memesis tends to emerge through game content. There is a level of serendipity to memesis through gameplay, which creates a higher turnover and echoes Ray's content as a variety streamer. This contrasts with his more constant memes such as W33DGOD and his alerts. These produce a fixed core identity, anchoring an otherwise fluid streaming persona.

Memetic histories also elicit a rhythm of change if this fluidity is traced over time. For example, following a viewing of *Bee Movie* (2007), Amber latched on to the memetic phrase "do you like jazz?", used by the bee protagonist as a hypothetical ice breaker. She integrated this into stream titles and spoke the line during streams. This memesis became most apparent during an overhaul of her Twitch alerts in early 2020, replacing several alerts with audio clips from or related to the movie. The relationship between Amber's stream collective and memesis is challenged here, as although she prepares the alerts, members of the collective are required to initiate them. However, this has significantly contributed to the collective identity of the stream through its multiplicity and the ability for all members to control its appearance. In August 2020, Amber changed these alerts for the third time that year, moving from *Bee Movie* (2007) to *Finding Nemo* (2003), and then to *Monsters Inc* (2001). When she launched the newest alerts, she emphasised that she was always looking for alerts that everyone could participate in - usually through a single-word message like 'BEES' - but would also continue to rotate them to keep things fresh. In this way, Amber has initiated a transition from memesis solely initiated by the streamer to a combination of both streamer- and spectator-initiated memesis tied to the same source material. It has also created a cycle that demarcates periods in the memetic history

of the stream. Ultimately, memetic histories emphasise the experimental and ever-changing nature of the Internet. Content creators are caught in the paradox of keeping their work fresh whilst maintaining the core elements that have drawn their audience to them. Some experiments fail, social capital is lost, and the collective identity is destabilised. Others succeed, accruing social capital, and solidifying the collective identity.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have examined how memes are mobilised on the livestreaming platform Twitch to facilitate the construction and performance of a curated streaming persona and the associated collective identity. Through my concept of memesis and a close analysis of two case studies, I have developed a framework for this examination tied to negotiations of user agencies, the video game in question, and the notion of memetic history. My analysis draws out how livestream spectators connect through memetic media, a central facet of contemporary digital culture. I found that memes provide excellent avenues for decentring the streamer and thus allowing active participation from spectators. At the same time, memes can also operate as tools for moderation and expressions of collective values.

Although a novel concept, memesis and the associated digital identity construction provide insights into livestreaming and Internet culture more broadly. I have demonstrated how livestreaming's unique features render memesis visible, however memesis occurs whenever memes are created. As a cultural process, memesis can be mobilised to understand how values are purposefully spread through memes online. Further, it provides insights into how Internet users understand themselves in relation to others that they share virtual space with. Other forms of digital persona, such as micro-celebrity and influencer culture, can be understood through this lens. In the broader context of game studies, memesis can be carried over to asynchronous modes of game-centric sociality. Examinations of memes embedded into recorded gameplay videos (on for example YouTube), or shared through virtual community settings like Discord, would benefit from an analysis through memesis. While discussed here through Twitch, the trifold link between memes, collective identity, and digital persona is ever-present, and this paper is one step towards better understanding this arrangement.

END NOTES

1. Other definitions do exist, for example https://digicult.it/internet/memesis-community-and-self-definition-in-the-age-of-memes/#_ftn1, however these have not gained much traction.
2. <https://www.twitch.tv/raynarvaezjr>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/user/AchievementHunter>
4. <https://www.twitch.tv/paladinamber>
5. Current as of March 2019. Image from <https://twitchemotes.com/channels/85875635>
6. The number of consecutive subscriptions within five minutes of each other.
7. Twitch currency used for donating.
8. <https://www.deviantart.com/heart0fink/art/W33DGOD-657419352>
9. <https://twitter.com/royallymad/status/1032441892707946497>

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