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## Video Game Streaming And Their Communities Of Play In UK And China (Dr Lynn Love; Xiaoxiong Xiong)

This paper will explore the culture of social video game consumption in the UK and China and the impact of commercial structures upon the social interaction between streamers and their audiences. Through a comparative analysis of literature reviewing video game streaming and viewing practices in each region and thematic analysis of streamer interviews and viewer surveys, we define the social and commercial conventions of Western and Chinese streaming platform approaches. Through the lenses of communities of play (DeKoven, 2002) and outsidership (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009) we seek to understand their differences, effect on socialisation and the potential implications for streamers, audiences and game developers seeking to engage with Chinese and Western streaming platforms.

Video game streaming is the act of live play of videogames for an audience. Video game streams are hosted by an individual or group who create content typically in the form of: a review of new video games; tips on how to play; a showcase their skills; or as entertainment driven play to build an audience. The global audience for video game streaming grew 10% between 2020 and 2021 to 728.8 million registered users where China represents the largest audience of 193 million (Newzoo 2021). Twitch.tv, Youtube and Facebook, the largest Western based streaming platforms, are established internationally with reach into US, UK, and Japanese markets. These platforms are not legally accessible in China (Brown, 2018), where live streaming is dominated by Douyu and Huya. Video Game Streaming platforms are complementary to the video games industry, enabling social interaction around and through video games whilst expanding the commercial opportunities afforded by video games for streamers, games developers and streaming platforms (Johnson and Woodcock, 2018).

In the UK and China, the streamer has proven to be central to the appeal of video game streams (Kowert and Emory 2021; Ding, 2016), rather than the specific game being streamed. This draws parallels to DeKoven's community of play, where playing together is more important than the game being played (DeKoven, 2002). In effect, the streamer and their community can be seen as a form of community of play but where the audience is not actively playing, but instead perform a form of active spectatorship through posting comments and virtual gift giving which is distinct to video game play and more akin to real world practices such as the video game arcade.

Game streams offer a new digital social space, a digital arcade, instantly accessible and where viewers can participate in the game community without game playing skills. This presents potential positive implications for accessibility, diversity, and social well-being. However, social interaction is mediated by the design of the streaming platform, in particular the tools, features, and commercial systems that the platform provides for its users. The design of these tools and the interactions they facilitate, particularly interactions which are mediated by monetisation strategies, alter the social dynamic within a streaming community: viewers can pay to have their comments on screen longer, can give digital gifts and be celebrated in leader boards for their financial contribution.

Monetisation of interaction can lead to hierarchies emerging within the community, where those who watch more often or financially invest have greater visibility, prestige, and influence. Such systems alter the potential for positive social relationships between members of the community (Zhang, Xiang and Hao, 2019) and between the community and the streamer, where the streamer's (and streaming platform's) financial success is a result of "audience work" (Carter & Egliston, 2021). The streamer becomes a celebrity, whose "play as work" ties the community together (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). Despite the potential negative effects of monetisation of interaction, streamer communities develop their own

shared language and in-jokes based upon shared experiences, building rapport and self-identification for individuals with the community, (Ding, 2016; Lei, 2016,) as is typical in a community of play (Flanagan 2009).

A community of play can be difficult for new members to join, where shared experiences and in-jokes act as a barrier to entry and in online spaces, toxicity and negative behaviour (Ding, 2016) is an on-going issue. Participating in live streaming successfully, requires that the streamer, viewer, streaming platform as well as other stakeholders such as game developers and middleware developers maintain a network of relations where each party are inter-connected in a complex and intangible manner. To survive and stand out, insidership (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009) becomes vital. This, nonetheless, is not a privilege that can be easily accessible to people and/or organisations from foreign countries. Overseas streamers, viewers and streaming platform could be threatened by liability of outsidership (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009) because they have very limited extant connections abroad. Sadly, the social interaction between streamers and viewers plus audience interaction, which constitutes a significant appeal in game streams, could hardly be achieved without sufficient participants from other groups. Game streaming could deliver satisfactory experience to its users only when there is a critical mass of streamers, viewers and their interactions abound (Brouthers, et al., 2016).

Outsidership presents a boundary both within a community of play and across cultural boundaries for game developers and streamers alike. However, Chinese streaming platforms are recognised to provide more diverse content beyond video games than their western counterparts (Lin and Lu, 2017) and to offer greater commercial opportunities to their streamers through their monetisation strategies and active competition between leading streaming platforms to attract streamers with large audiences (Cunningham, Craig and Vi, 2019).

The growing audience in China for video game streaming, their diversity of content, along with novel forms of audience interaction (e.g. bullet comments) and stringent approach to toxicity position China as a market leader in the live streaming space. What can Western platforms learn from Chinese platforms? To what extent does outsidership influence interactions between streamers, the audience, and the streaming platform across and between these markets? Drawing from existing literature, streamer interviews and audience surveys this paper will assess these questions. As a result, we present implications for streamers, game developers, audiences, and streaming platforms in seeking to engage with audiences internationally.

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