



# Fortnite Streamers as Influencers: A Study on Gamers' Perceptions

Reyhaan King<sup>1</sup> · Teresa de la Hera<sup>1</sup> 

Received: 20 July 2020 / Accepted: 1 September 2020 / Published online: 16 September 2020  
© The Author(s) 2020

## Abstract

This paper explores how players perceive *Fortnite* streamers as influencers and how these internal perceptions shape their experience of the streamers' videos and their own gameplay. *Fortnite* is currently the most popular multi-platform free-to-play game. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted revealing that streamers are, first, perceived as entertainers by showcasing high-level gameplay. Gamers consume this content because it is perceived as fun, relaxing, and an engaging way to learn. Streamers are, second, an inspiration to play by inspiring competition, collaboration, curiosity and commitment in gamers through their expertise in showcasing the game. Finally, gamers perceive streamers as endorsers through their videos as skins are perceived as giving social status, the battle pass is perceived to provide rewards, skin choice is highlighted in the player's game, and new game mechanics are promoted.

**Keywords** Free-to-play gaming · Gamer perception · Influencer marketing · Fortnite · Video game streamers · Thematic analysis

## 1 Introduction

*Fortnite* (Epic Games 2017) is currently the most popular multi-platform free-to-play game. *Fortnite* is a battle royale style game in which 100 players drop down into a map or battleground and have to source their own weapons and armor. Players only have one life and therefore the focus is on survival. *Fortnite* is not the first battle royale style game but, its building feature, cartoon art style and gameplay, set it apart from the rest, resulting in its massive success today. The game debuted in 2017 and works on a seasonal content model which typically lasts 90 days. It has seen stable growth and has maintained a substantial following of 200 million players,

---

✉ Teresa de la Hera  
delahera@eshcc.eur.nl

<sup>1</sup> Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Burgemeester Oudlaan, 3062 PA Rotterdam, The Netherlands

generating revenue of \$2.4 billion in 2018 (Smith 2019), the largest annual revenue for a game in history. *Fortnite*'s player base follows general trends in the gaming industry with a majority of 80% of PC players being male and in the 18-25 year age group (Iqbal 2018). A study conducted by LendEDU found that approximately 69% of *Fortnite* players have purchased in-game items; however most do not know these items do not give an in-game advantage (Batchelor 2018).

Virtual products follow the same macroeconomic principles as real-world goods such as demand and supply (Castronova et al. 2009). Virtual products come in two forms for free-to-play games, functional props that can modify gameplay and decorative props that are purely aesthetic. Functional props allow gamers with little time and extra money to progress faster in a game and are perceived as less fair than decorative props that do not affect gameplay (Holin and Chuen-Tsai 2007). In the case of *Fortnite*, only decorative props are available which is another reason for its popularity due to perceived trueness to being 100% free-to-play.

Much like regular products, virtual products can be marketed and advertised through the use of streamers, gamers who showcase their gameplay online for others to view. Streaming has become popular because it is simultaneously a form of entertainment but also a form of social interaction where gamers can engage with the community of games they like and improve their own gameplay. Due to the rise in popularity of streaming, some streamers have risen to amass followings in the millions such as Ninja with a YouTube subscriber count of 21 million. Streamers provide gamers with information on the latest game updates, new game mechanics as well as generally determine the most effective strategies in-game, often referred to as The Meta. With such large numbers of views, it is clear that these streamers exact a large amount of influence over viewers, giving relevance to their possible impacts, which should be studied. It is therefore important to understand how gamers create these perceptions of the value of in-game items and how external forces shape their perception.

For these reasons, this paper seeks to expand knowledge in the field of game studies and influencer marketing by exploring how free-to-play game *Fortnite*'s players construct their perception of their favorite streamers in relation to the game itself and the virtual goods sold in the games online store. The following research question is therefore addressed in this study: *How do Fortnite gamers perceive in-game item's endorsements in streamers' YouTube videos?*

## 1.1 Free-to-Play Gaming

Free-to-play gaming refers to a specific form of gaming where the game can be acquired and played free of charge. While the game itself is free-to-play most free-to-play gaming companies encourage gamers to purchase virtual goods during play (Kati et al. 2014). The rise of popularity of this form of gaming has spurred research into its specific effects on social behavior. Research has explored this phenomenon from a variety of perspectives, from how virtual world economies mimic real-world patterns (Castronova et al. 2009), to the personal motivations and purchasing patterns players have for purchasing virtual goods (Wohn 2014). A notable of

research has also gone into the monetization of free-to-play gaming, with Holin and Chuen-Tsai (2007) looking specifically at the challenges facing free-to-play games regarding monetization as they highlight the concept of the magic circle, in which game monetization elements need to be perceived as fair by players or they will not encourage spending.

Gamers can perceive virtual goods as items that improve play (Hamari and Lehdonvirta 2010) or as symbols of status and achievement in the game which encourages players to either spend real-world money on them or become proficient enough in the game to unlock them naturally (Hsiao and Chen 2016). Moving further into this topic Hamari et al. (2017) explore how user experience and service quality encourage users to use freemium services but that they go premium because of commitment to the game and intention to play more to gain more rewards. So far it is clear that gamer perception can be influenced by game design and the socially constructed value surrounding virtual goods. In this research specific focus was given to the main concepts relating to how in-game items shape gamers' perception of achievement and enjoyment of the game as well as how these items shape gamers' perceptions of their own online identity.

### 1.1.1 Achievement

Achievement is a notable feeling that gamers have when certain conditions in the game have been met (Boyle et al. 2012), for example, completing challenges or unlocking new items for a character. Achievement in combination with social interaction is listed as one of the main motives to play among male non-problematic players (Kneer and Glock 2013). Feeling a sense of achievement may encourage gamers to spend more time playing a game (Boyle et al. 2012) on engagement in video games.

Cha (2011) examined the factors and consumer characteristics that influence purchase intentions of virtual goods. It was found that perceived usefulness, ease of use, enjoyment, security and privacy concerns influence intention to purchase virtual items and that gender had a moderating role on these effects. They posit that males with high-perceived usefulness, ease of use and enjoyment are more likely to purchase virtual goods than females with similar perceptions. The perceived usefulness in this case can be interpreted as useful to improve the user experience thus linking usefulness and achievement, in the sense that the more useful the virtual good the more likely a user is to feel that the item helps them achieve more in the virtual world. As mentioned previously in order to improve in the game and seek higher forms of achievement gamers may watch higher-level gamers in streams or on YouTube. In a study by Glas (2015) it is highlighted that there is rise in-gamer streaming and that the streamer is both the subject and playing the subject at the same time. They note that one of the uses of watching others play games is to improve one's own gameplay by learning the desired behaviors from the streamer. This is how gamers utilize streamer videos to reach their goals and develop their sense of achievement. It is important, therefore, how streamers are perceived to influence the sense of achievement of gamers that watch their videos online.

### 1.1.2 Enjoyment

Enjoyment is considered to be one of the main motivations gamers have for playing games, and can be described as the feeling of satisfaction or fun when playing (Park and Lee 2011). Previous research also shows that enjoyment does not necessarily rely on in-game success and it can be linked to secondary gratifications, for example self-efficacy experiences (Rieger et al. 2014). Hamari (2015) and Lehdonvirta (2009) echo this notion by stating that higher enjoyment leads to greater amounts of play and thus higher levels of purchase intentions over time, but that enjoyment in the short run does not necessarily cause purchase intention of in-game items. Complementary studies (Hamari and Lehdonvirta 2010; Oh and Ryu 2007) also show that gamer's perceptions are shaped by those who showcase specific game mechanics, such as streamers.

### 1.1.3 Identity Building

Identity building in this research refers to the ways in which gamers construct their online identity in a game. In a qualitative study using interviews Marder et al. (2019) found that in-game items are usually purchased as a means of conveying online identity in free-to-play games. They found that items could be used to keep the game novel and interesting, for aesthetics, self-gratification, character dedication, reciprocity and visual authority and social distinction. Essentially the stronger the emotions of the gamer towards the game, the more likely they are to engage in identity building activities in order to satisfy their needs such as the need to set oneself aside from others in-game. However, it is interesting to note what other factors shape this perception, such as external references by peers or game design (Hamari and Lehdonvirta 2010) or streamers Dux (2018). Guo and Barnes (2009) note that social influence plays a role in purchase intentions. This can be linked to players' need to belong to a group and their feelings of reputation and reciprocity (De la Hera 2019), which can be both a reason for streamers to share their experiences with others, and gamers to try to mimic streamers. Character competency here drives gamers to purchase virtual items as a means of achievement and also a means of distinguishing oneself from other gamers, which builds on the notion of visual authority.

## 2 Streamers as Influencers

The notion of influencers as a research topic has been widely explored with early quantitative research by Goldsmith and Clark (2008) showing strong positive effects for purchase intentions due to opinion leaders in comparison to traditional advertising techniques. In most cases influencers rely heavily on producing viral content. The nature of virality is important for this study as both content producers and content consumers follow these elements, in the sense that consumers look for relatable content to share and producers seek to create relatable content to be shared. In essence, influencers in the free-to-play game sphere are referred to as streamers, and streamers are seen as a source of information and entertainment by gamers. As such

the following sections will relate the concepts within influencer marketing to gamers and this adds to the theoretical backbone for this research.

## 2.1 Attractiveness

For this research streamers' attractiveness refers to how relatable the streamer and the content that is shared is to the user. In their quantitative study Chu and Kim (2011) found that content from close friends or trusted sources that provide important and or actionable information is seen as the most attractive by users. In the case of gaming, the greater the tie strength and relatability the more likely a gamer is to view a streamers content, they primarily view streamer videos to improve upon their own gameplay and are thus looking for streamers that are similar to them in that sense (Chu and Kim 2011).

Hsieh et al. (2012) proposed that the propensity to forward content is determined by three factors being awareness of persuasive intent, perceived humor and the multimedia effect. They highlight humor and the multimedia effect (the richness of media content) were seen to positively influence attitudes towards shared content and had a higher likelihood of getting a user to share this content. This reinforces the statement that the more relatable the content the more appealing it is and thus the more attractive it is.

Nascimento et al. (2014b) found that high-level gameplay as well as socialization factors played an important role in the viewing behavior of gamers. High-level gameplay satisfies both the need for entertainment and the need to improve one's own level of play while engaging oneself with a community of gamers. Sjöblom et al. (2017) build on this view and list three dimensions which users follow when viewing online streams. They propose that tensions release, information seeking, and social/personal integration are factors that influence users' propensity to stream. Tension release refers to the entertainment value of the stream as a means of relieving stress, information seeking refers to users' desire to improve their gameplay and social/personal integration refers to the sense of community one gets from engaging in a streamer's video and relating it to their own experience with the game. Sjöblom and Hamari (2017) add an emotional dimension to this model by also identifying that users seek to get emotional satisfaction from streams through entertainment value from high-level visually pleasing gameplay.

## 2.2 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is also considered to be a determinant for users to view an influencer's content. A study by De Veirman et al. (2017) found that perceived popularity encourages trustworthiness, which touches on the notion of reputation. In this case, a positive reputation may encourage new users to trust the influencer faster than if they were not popular. In the gaming world the more popular a streamer is, then the more likely a gamer is to view and believe their content. Essentially gamers would be more likely to trust a streamer if there are perceived similarities between the gamer and streamer, and this will likely lead to the gamer consuming more of

this content as well as sharing it in their network. Greenheck et al. (2018) state that for messages to be perceived positively special attention should be given to ensure that the message content and influencer values align in order to ensure authenticity and trustworthiness in the audiences. Applying this line of thinking to this research echoes previous studies in the sense that message content, relationship to the influencer and the size of the influencer impact the trustworthiness users ascribe to this influencer.

### 2.3 Expertise

One of the last theoretical constructs found to have an impact on content views of influencers was that of expertise. Expertise was found to be a positive influence on source credibility in the study conducted by Pornpitakpan (2004a), which highlights that perceived expertise leads to positive attitudes towards the endorser and advertised good or service. In this sense expertise is linked to credibility but is also a separate dimension by which users evaluate influencers. In the context of *Fortnite* streamers, expertise would be evaluated by their win/loss ratio, number of subscribers and number of videos posted for example as well as their in-game strategies, movement and general knowledge of game mechanics. Perry (2012) and Wu (2016) posit that disclosure improves credibility and that higher source credibility is usually associated with higher perceptions of expertise.

## 3 Methodology

Twelve semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 min were conducted from April 1st -May 31st 2019. One participant opted for a face-to-face interview while the rest opted for online interviews. Eight interviews were conducted via Skype and two using Discord, a communication platform designed for gamers. The interviews were first conducted and recorded, then transcribed verbatim using Temi, a transcription service tool. The transcriptions of each interview were uploaded into Atlas.ti for the process of coding.

For this study thematic content analysis was used to analyze the in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews. Thematic analysis was chosen for this project because it emphasizes the “context of the material being analyzed and allows for both an inductive and deductive form of analysis” (Vaismoradi et al. 2013, p. 399) meaning that themes can be found based on previous literature as well as be formed from the current study allowing for greater flexibility in the analysis.

A systematic process of thematic content analysis was used to analyze the transcripts of the 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews. First, during transcription of the interviews preliminary ideas for codes were noted for future use. Secondly the initial codes were created, interesting features of data were systematically coded across the data set in an exhaustive manner in order to reach data saturation (Braun and Clarke as cited in Vaismoradi et al. 2013). Coding was primarily theory driven, so the third step, searching for themes (selective codes) and sub themes (axial codes)

was more structured than the previous level of open coding. The data in this stage revealed 3 overarching themes or selective codes with 3–4 sub themes or axial codes per theme. The themes created were exhaustive and contained all open codes created.

### 3.1 Sampling

Interviewees were sourced using a mix of purposeful, snowball and convenience sampling (Flick 2007). Purposeful sampling was used because the participants of the research were required to be regular *Fortnite* gamers, and regular consumers of streamer’s YouTube videos. If one of the requirements were not met, the participant would be unable to provide the necessary understanding of the phenomena. In order to ensure there was equal number of female and male participants female-specific gaming groups were contacted through Facebook with no response. Due to this all participants in this research were male. However the player base of *Fortnite* is 72% male (Gough 2018), so this makes it interesting to pay more attention to male players in this specific context.

A sample table with specific information on the participants is provided in Table 1. The age range for this sample in this research was 21–25 years due to the recent popularity of *Fortnite* and its player demographics, which 67% of players are between the ages of 18–24 (Gough 2018). There were no restrictions on nationality as *Fortnite* is distributed globally and has a player base in most countries. Participants were asked whom their favorite streamer was, which was later found to be linked to the amount of time they spent playing and their level of commitment to the game. The most frequent streamer noted was SypherPK known primarily for his educational strategic videos on *Fortnite* game mechanics and Tfue was known primarily for being the top *Fortnite* gamer and professional player. Nickmercs was the third most mentioned streamer due to his comedic emphasis in his *Fortnite* YouTube

**Table 1** Participants’ Information

| Participant | Age | Occupation  | Nationality     | Favorite Streamer |
|-------------|-----|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Rodrigo     | 23  | Working     | Spanish         | Sypherpk          |
| Max         | 24  | Working     | Dutch/Taiwanese | Tsm Hamlinz       |
| Andre       | 24  | PHD student | Brazilian       | Nickmercs         |
| Mati        | 24  | Working     | Polish          | SypherPK          |
| Camiel      | 21  | Student     | Dutch           | DrDisrespect      |
| Andrei      | 25  | Working     | Albanian/Dutch  | SypherPK          |
| Maxim       | 22  | Student     | Russian/Dutch   | Nickmercs         |
| Bartek      | 21  | Student     | Polish          | SypherPK          |
| Wisse       | 22  | Student     | NL              | Tfue              |
| Dennis      | 23  | Student     | NL              | Tfue              |
| Pete        | 23  | Working     | USA             | Tfue              |
| Kojo        | 24  | Student     | South Africa    | Tfue              |

videos, as such participants would mainly consume his content for entertainment purposes.

### 3.2 Operationalization

The interview guide was divided into eight sections, including an introductory and a closing section (see "Appendix 1"). The other six sections were each relating to a different aspect of theory: achievement, enjoyment, identity building, attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise. Besides this, selected videos of the favorite streamer of each participant were discussed during the interview.

## 4 Results and Discussion

The in-depth qualitative interviews produced four distinctly unique selective codes generated from 94 open codes. The main themes uncovered through the interviews that show how streamers are perceived by gamers, *Streamer as an Entertainer* (Sect. 4.1), *Streamer as Inspiration to Play* (Sect. 4.2), *Streamer as Endorser* (Sect. 4.3). Each selective code or theme consists of 3-4 axial codes or sub-themes that are discussed in this chapter.

### 4.1 Streamer as an Entertainer

Streamers are mainly perceived as a source of entertainment by gamers, and this is the main reason why they decide to watch their videos and follow their channel. Within this theme, we found three different motivations for gamers to consume streamer's content that are linked to different ways in which this content is perceived as entertaining. These correspond to the three axial codes: *consume content for fun*, *consume content for relaxation* and *consume content as an engaging learning experience*.

*Fun* in the form of entertaining content is seen to be a key motivator in attracting viewers to a stream and also necessary to develop a positive relationship with viewers. *Fun* is usually linked by gamers to the personality of the streamer and their gameplay, something that was also shown by previous research (Nascimento et al. 2014b; Sjöblom and Hamari 2017). Humor is one way of creating *fun* through the streamer's own personality or the content they show on their channel. Max (24), for example, stated that he primarily watches the streamer Nickmerc's videos because "It's just got a lot of jokes [...] and when he invites other streamers and he's playing together with is also like making jokes with them and he just seems like a nice guy". Conversely participants noted that when they did not agree with a streamer's personality or style of presenting content they were less inclined to consume their videos and did not seek their advice to improve gameplay. Rodri (24), stated "If I don't really like them and I don't like what they're saying, then I'd rather not watch them". These gamers illustrate how personality is an important factor in creating



entertaining content, which was also stated to match gameplay in terms of importance for perceiving a video as entertaining.

Aside from just *consuming content for fun*, some participants also stated that they watched a streamer's YouTube video *for relaxation*, most often after work or during meals. Max (24) said "That's what I mean by unwind, to come home after a long day and not think about the day anymore". In this case watching streamers' videos is a form of escapism.

A majority of participants were also motivated to *consume content as an engaging learning experience* with streamers and used their YouTube videos to improve their own gameplay. In this case the learning process itself is perceived as entertaining. For example, Rodri (24) stated "I do like the guy, and I've kinda grown with him since I started. But in general, he is a really good builder, as a player is really good, strategically speaking and how he builds, how he edits and all this. So I really enjoy seeing that part. And actually learning from him, he does also a lot of educational videos which is also one of the reasons that I got really into this guy's stream because he actually taught you how to do what he was trying, what he was doing". This quote shows how the learning process itself is seen as entertainment and how this encourages the gamer to consume more of the streamer's content in order to improve their gameplay. By packing the information in an entertaining format, gamers are able to consume their content for self-improvement as well as entertainment and may become closer to the streamer.

## 4.2 Streamer as an Inspiration to Play

While the first theme shows that gamers mainly approach streamers because they perceived their content as entertaining, this second theme shows that watching their content becomes an inspiration for them to play in different ways. Within this theme we identified four different axial codes, that show that streamers *inspire competition*, *inspire collaboration*, *inspire curiosity* and *inspire commitment* in gamers; and this shapes their experience of the game and thus their perception.

Streamers *inspire competition* in gamers through their own high-level of gameplay. Gamers would watch this gameplay to use it to improve their own to achieve more wins and/or kills. Gamers noted that they would feel inspired to play after watching high-level gameplay to try and mimic the feelings they had while watching the streamer. For example Wisse (24) said: "you tend to get in like a, some sort of fugue state or at least get a really good focus in that kind of games [high-level] because you know that you can maybe possibly win or at least get a victory. And in those moments, you tend to really play at your best. And because he [Tfue] is my vision of what's best and the way he plays, I might make different decisions on the basis of what I've seen in his videos". As noted in existing literature, this sense of achievement then inspires their competitiveness amongst friends and in online matches (Boyle et al. 2012; Glas 2015).

Gamers who were less competitive, however, manifested that streamers inspired them *to collaborate* with friends. Many gamers noted that playing with friends or watching streamer videos with friends encouraged them to play more. For example,

Max (24), said: “I do feel like the idea of playing a game together, experiencing the same battles, may create some bonding moments or some team building in a way because we need to communicate in order to win. And when you’re not fighting, you’re socializing”. In this case it was the distance separating friends as well as their combined interest in the streamer Nickmercs and SypherPK that encouraged the group to play more together and utilize what they learned from the streamer.

In other cases the streamer would showcase new game modes in *Fortnite* and seeing this would encourage gamers to try these new modes. The streamer, in this case, *inspires curiosity* in gamers by highlighting different in-game mechanics and modes that players can make use of. Recently *Fortnite* has expanded its game modes from the standard battle royale modes by adding a creative mode, where gamers can create their own maps and game types to share online and with up to 16 friends. Kojo (24) stated that “Actually I watched Lazerbeam do it and I was like, let me see if I can get through this Deathrun. So, I also actually loaded it up for myself.” Here we see clearly how gamers are more willing to try out things based on streamers’ recommendations if there is a high level of trust, or perception of expertise.

Finally, streamers *inspire commitment* in gamers through their videos by constantly keeping gamers in the loop with the latest game information. Streamers also package this information in their videos alongside humorous content that keeps players interested in the game. Streamers also promote the rewarding aspects of the game to players and show what benefits they can gain through commitment. Max (24) said, “I think it does a little bit. It adds to the incentive to keep playing” when referring to the rewards the streamer shows you and whether that keeps a gamer playing a game. Previous literature of influencer marketing (De Veirman et al. 2017; Greenheck et al. 2018) can be used to support the idea that gamers are *inspired to commit* to the game because they trust the streamer and are enticed by the rewards the game offers

### 4.3 Streamer as an Endorser

The previous two themes explained first, the reasons why gamers are motivated to follow streamers, and second, why they also become a source of inspiration on how to play. This third theme is focused on explaining how streamers’ endorsements of concrete virtual products or game mechanics in the game are perceived by gamers. This theme is formed from four axial codes being *skins perceived as giving social status*, *battle pass perceived to provide rewards*, *highlighting skin choice in the player’s game*, *promoting new game mechanics*.

Skins are outfits for a player’s avatar that can be obtained from the *Fortnite* battle pass or purchased directly from the Epic Games store. As gamers consume streamer video content and become more invested in the game, they simultaneously also become more invested in the community skin subcultures surrounding the game. Wisse (24) mentioned that “some people tend to have like subcultures within the game, within the skins as then the soccer players are the best players, or the John Wick skin had some type of image around it. So, it does add to the game because a lot of people play it and certain people that have certain skins will

then get a certain image”. The interviews revealed that gamers perceived skins as a means of social status within the game, where certain skin choices are associated with concrete skills, such as the scuba skin, while others such as the default skin are associated with a lack of skill. Interviews also show that certain streamers like Tfue have changed this perception, by using the default skin and performing high-level gameplay as mentioned by Dennis (24) “he [Tfue] would only have a default skin. So, you know, before he did that, whenever people saw someone with no skin, they were bots, you know, people would rush them because it was free kills. But after a while when the game was out because most people had a skin, whenever you saw a default skin, people would run away from it because those were usually the try-hards”. This notion of “try hard” was brought up by many participants and refers to when a gamer becomes serious and puts all the focus into trying to win the game. Streamers therefore encourage gamers to *perceive skins as giving social status* by performing high-level gameplay in a certain skin. The streamer’s community then creates the status surrounding the skin and all who purchase that skin become associated with that status. Previous studies already showed that gamers who work up to a certain skin they had been looking forward to not feeling rewarded by their achievement (Guo and Barnes 2009) and expressed this was a key motivator for purchasing the battle pass.

One of the roles of streamers as sources of information on the game is the showcasing of the *Fortnite* battle pass on their channels. Streamers showcase items players can receive from the battle pass which has shaped the perception that gamers *perceive the battle pass to provide rewards*. The prospect of rewards was mentioned by many gamers as a motivator to play the game more and complete in-game challenges as mentioned by Kojo (24) “I realized that you can actually earn a whole bunch in the battle pass and you earn more than just skins in the battle pass so I’m like, okay cool, let me actually get the battle pass and work my way to get those skins”. The feeling of being rewarded was also associated with completing the in-game challenges. Gamers noted that certain challenges available to battle pass owners which unlocked specific reactive skins, skins which change appearance in-game, were other aspects that made the battle pass feel rewarding. Bartek (21) said “Now you have that reactive skins are the ones that you have challenges for. So, you know, you’ve got to work for, to extend your skin. So last season it was the pirate’s skin, I really enjoyed that one. You know, how as you progress, you know, it expanded, and it was even cooler”. This feeling of being rewarded and achieving rewards after consistent commitment to playing the game encourages gamers to play more to seek even more rewards (Guo and Barnes 2009), in some cases looking to streamers for information on how to progress.

The showcasing of in-game items by streamers not only serves as promotion for the battle pass but also provides information to gamers on *skin choice in the player’s game*. Most of the participants who were more committed to the game mentioned that they would watch a streamer’s showcase of new skins to visualize what it would look like in-games of their own. Going further than just aesthetics streamers such as SypherPK provide commentary on the skins’ playability, for instance if a skin has a glitch that allows it to be seen behind cover, or if it takes up too much space on the screen. Mati (24) mentioned, “I did catch myself wearing, you know, or buying

skins that I saw Sypher use and I thought they looked pretty cool on him and then I would to get it myself”.

Finally, gamers perceive *streamers as endorsers* in regards to new information on the game by *promoting new game mechanics*. The rising trend revealed in the interviews noted that streamers are increasingly creating unique in-game content and game modes and showcasing it on their YouTube channel. New game modes available in the Creative mode of Fortnite such as Deathruns, or end game simulations are perceived as being entertaining and encourage gamers to try out these modes themselves. Andre (24) said, “I think they promote the game because you find new things, new, cool things that you can do in the game right. And um, yeah, they show off the games, full potential and the competitive side kind of, so that’s cool” whereas Kojo (24) even tried one of these new modes out himself after watching his favorite streamer LazerBeam fail to complete one. Streamers are therefore seen as *promoting new game mechanics* due to their reputation as opinion leaders in the industry, gamers who consume their content see these game modes and due to the association of the streamer being credible (Abidin and Ots 2015; De Veirman et al. 2017; Greenheck et al. 2018), they feel encouraged to try out these new modes themselves. Gamers also noted that they would look to streamers for information on the new “Meta” of the game. Meta refers to the most popular strategies and techniques within a game; for example, when Fortnite was first released the “Meta” was for players to have two shotguns to avoid slow reload times. Fortnite releases updates bi-weekly and in these updates weapons, vehicles and items are removed or added which changes the Meta. Pete (23) would check Tfue’s channel to see “if there’s any buffed [made stronger] or nerfed [made weaker] weapons, things of that nature. Like what’s the new Meta really, like I’ll just see his load out and I’ll be like alright, I’ll see if that works with my gameplay”. Here again we can see that gamers are not idle recipients of messages but take the streamers advice into consideration alongside their own needs. If the streamer is not perceived as being expert enough to understand the current strategies in the game, then they are no longer seen as a source of information but rather a form of entertainment and thus lose the perception of expertise (Lin et al. 2018; Perry 2012; Wu 2016). However if the streamer is perceived as being an expert, such as Tfue, then they create the Meta, as Dennis (24) said, “if you watch Tfue and he’s using another gun and someone asks him, why are you using that gun? It’s bad, you know, and Tfue tells you it’s good and he shows you why it’s good, you know? That weapon becomes popular in no time just, you know streamers. They definitely create the meta” and so we see that the gamers own perception of a streamers expertise and level of trustworthiness shape the perception of the *streamer as an endorser* in relation to *promoting new game mechanics*.

## 5 Conclusion

This research set out to explore how gamers construct their perception regarding product endorsements in streamer’s YouTube videos. A qualitative study of twelve in-depth semi-structured was conducted revealing three distinct ways in which gamers perceive streamers and their YouTube video content. The results show that, first,

gamers perceive *streamers as entertainers* and typically consume their video content because the high-level gameplay, and information provided by the streamers is considered *fun, relaxing*, and as an *engaging learning experience*. As such streamers are seen as the authority on in-game knowledge and their level of expertise draws in different types of gamers.

Second, gamers perceive *streamers as an inspiration to play*. Through high-level gameplay streamers inspire gamers to be *competitive* and through community engagement they inspire gamers to be *collaborative*, oftentimes playing with other famous streamers to highlight the excitement playing with friends can give. Being informative in their videos *inspires curiosity*, as gamers felt inclined to check streamer YouTube channels to learn new tactics and then apply this knowledge in games of their own. Finally, streamers *inspire commitment* in gamers by showing them the best the game has to offer and keeping their interest through humorous, high-level or unique content.

Third, gamers perceive *streamers as endorsers* as they create the environment where *skins are perceived as giving social status* by performing extraordinary feats while wearing a skin, gamers begin to associate that skin with skill and purchase it to mimic this skill in games of their own. Streamers also *highlight skin choice in the player's game* by showcasing how the skin looks in games of their own, they allow gamers to visualize what they would look like in their own games and if the gamers like how it looks they are encouraged to purchase it. Since streamers are seen as experts and in some cases ambassadors of the game they are also perceived as *promoting new game mechanics* such as new game modes, new strategies and exploits for gamers to use.

Previous research on this topic focused primarily on how companies can use influencers to promote their brand (or on what motivated gamers to play and purchase in-game items) while this research highlights a critical perspective on how gamers construct their perception of streamers by consuming their videos on YouTube. Gamers are drawn to the streamer's YouTube as they are seeking entertainment, the gamers then become inspired to play more due to the streamers' content and finally they perceive elements in the streamers' videos as endorsements which encourage them to try out new game modes or purchase the *Fortnite* battle pass or skins to recreate the streamers experience for themselves.

This research has built upon existing research in the field of influencer marketing and online purchase behavior in the context of digital video game stores by providing a qualitative outlook on the motivations gamers have when interacting with in-game elements. This perspective suggests that video game streamers should be considered in the same way as influencers in other fields, as they operate in similar ways. Video game streamers gain popularity in similar ways to other influencers and are held to the same level of constant scrutiny, whereby followers can be gained and lost as a direct result of the streamers' content or performance. However, the more relatable and actionable the content is, the more comfortable gamers become looking to a streamer for *entertainment* and *to learn in an entertaining way*. Gamers then become *inspired to play* in order to replicate what they have learned in games of their own, when they succeed to replicating these techniques, they become closer to the streamer. Once the gamer is sufficiently close to the streamer and consumes their

content regularly, they then *perceive them as an endorser* and attribute value to the items the streamers use in their videos. Therefore existing theories on **trustworthiness** (Chu and Kim 2011; Nascimento et al. 2014a; Sjöblom et al. 2017), **attractiveness** (De Veirman et al. 2017; Greenheck et al. 2018; Pornpitakpan 2004b) and **expertise** (Lin et al. 2018; Perry 2012; Wu 2016) all contribute to motivations to watch a streamer and believe in their content. Whereas the existing theories on **achievement** (Boyle et al. 2012; Guo and Barnes 2009), **enjoyment** (Hamari 2015; Hsiao and Chen 2016; Wu and Liu 2007) and **online identity building** (Guo and Barnes 2009; Marder et al. 2019; Park and Lee 2011) what factors may shape a gamer's perception in regards to in-game items and mechanics. As such this research serves a bridge between game studies and influencer marketing studies as it sits in the intersection between determining how gamers construct the perception of their favorite streamer and how this perception shapes their behavior towards in-game elements.

Besides this, this research explains how gamers develop closeness to the streamer and how this encourages them to watch more of this streamers content that was also seen as a motivator to play more. If the inspiration to play is not managed, gamers can become very invested in the game and overtime become encouraged to purchase items from the in-game store as they strive to imitate their favorite streamer. Skins were perceived as improving play due to the association of the skin and streamer, where gamers noted that they felt they played better after purchasing skins with a certain in-game cultural connotation. Left unchecked this could encourage new gamers to make more purchases within the online store to gain a sense of achievement and feel more confident while playing. However, this may create negative experiences for gamers when their skill does not improve despite the purchase of new skins falsely perceived to improve play. Streamers are perceived as endorsers and so should be regulated and forced to disclosed advertising intent in the same way other brands do when producing content on YouTube. With more disclosure regarding advertising, gamers can be informed that they don't just watch the streamer for *entertainment or learning* but that they are simultaneously having items promoted to them while being entertained.

This research is also socially relevant to video game developers as it provides a thick description of how gamers perceive the game mechanics, video game store and virtual good design in ways that encourage play and purchase as well as the sharing of user generated content with other gamers, such as the case with the *Fortnite* (2017) creative mode. Video game developers, specifically Epic Games could utilize insights in this research for developing more game modes that cater to the motivations of specific gamers, making the game more inclusive and possibly expanding the player base.

This research had several limitations. There was a limitation in regards to sampling as only males were found for the interviews due to the sampling being done through the researcher's personal network. As such the results highlight the specific experience of male *Fortnite* gamers who account for approximately 80% of the player base, leaving 20% undetermined. Therefore, if the research was to be conducted again, specific attention should be given to ensuring female *Fortnite* gamers are included in the sample. The gamers interviewed were similar in age ranging from

21 to 25, which again represents 80% of the FortNite player base, however there is a substantial percentage of the population below this age and they most likely have a very different way of perceiving streamers, which presents another limitation and opportunity to further this research.

To ensure future validity further research should seek to quantify this influence on a larger scale and in different types of game. As this research focused on the specific case of *Fortnite* it would be interesting to explore if similar results would be found in gamers of pay-to-play games, as the free aspect served as a primary motivator to initially get gamers interested in the game.

Similarly, research could be conducted on what virtual goods appeal most to gamers and why in order to develop legislation on a safe means to allow children to play these games without fear of falling victim to subliminal advertising techniques. The video game industry has exploded in terms of its revenue and so must be complemented by ethical checks to ensure it remains a safe form of entertainment.

**Funding** Not applicable.

**Data Availability** Not applicable.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interests** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

**Code Availability** Not applicable.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## Appendix 1: Interview Guide

### Informed Consent Intro

- What is your name?
- How old are you?
- Do you study or work at the moment?
  - If study: What do you study?
  - If work: What is your profession?
- How much would you say that you play FortNite?
- Why do you play?

- Do you watch streamers on YouTube or any other platform?
- Who?
- How often?
- Why?
- Have you bought a FortNite battle pass or items from the online store?
  - If yes:
    - How often?
    - Which was the reason you bought (a certain item)?

### **Attractiveness**

- What makes you want to watch your favorite streamer's content?
- What about their personality? How important is it for you?
- Is the physical appearance of (streamer) something that you pay attention to?
- What would make a streamer unattractive to you?
  - What wouldn't you like them to do or say in their videos?
- Why would you not follow a certain streamer?

### **Trustworthiness**

- Would you say that you trust (streamer)?
  - If yes: How long would you say that you have trusted this streamer's content?
- Do you consider him to be a reliable source of in-game strategy information on FortNite?
- How do you value the information that he provides on the use of in-game items, loot locations and challenges?
  - Do you remember a specific example?
- What other type of information do you expect this streamer to provide you with?
- Is there a reason why you would not trust a streamer?
- Do you remember a concrete example in which you did not trust something that a streamer said?

### **Expertise**

- Let's look at a video of your favorite streamer. (Watch selected video with interviewee)
- What do you think of this segment here? (Show video clip of high-level gameplay of favorite streamer)
- Do you think the streamer is knowledgeable about FortNite?



- How does the streamer stand out from other streamers you watch in relation to their knowledge of the game?
- What actions should be taken for the streamer to be considered an expert?
- Would you say he is an expert?
  - Why?
- Does the fact that he is an expert matter to you?
  - Why?
- Have you tried to learn from the streamer?
  - In what ways?
- How did that influence the way you felt about the streamer?

### **Achievement**

- How does playing FortNite make you feel?
- Why do you do it?
- How do you feel when you complete a challenge in FortNite?
  - Did this change when you have or didn't have the battle pass?
- Were you able to complete challenges with advice from your favorite streamer?
  - Do you remember a concrete example?
  - How did this make you feel about the streamer?
- How does having access to battle pass content make you feel?
  - Do you think it allows you to play better?
  - Why?

### **Enjoyment**

- Can you recall a moment where you were watching a streamer and you enjoyed his video?
  - If yes: Can you describe what was happening and why you liked it?
  - Have you ever recalled this experience when you were playing?
- How does the streamer use items such as vehicles and building objects in his videos that you enjoy watching?
  - Why does this bring you joy?

### **Identity Building**

- Do you like the outfits your streamer's avatar wears?

- How does your own avatar look?
  - Can you please describe?
  - How is this related to the way that you feel when you are playing the game?
  - Do you like the way your avatar looks?
- Do you choose the way your avatar looks based on recommendations of the streamer or the way his avatar looks?
  - Why?
- Did you notice a change in your feelings when you got new items for your avatar?
  - How did this change from feelings you had before?
- Tell me about your items and player set up in FortNite?
  - Why did you choose these items?
  - Do you think the streamer influence your decision at all?
- How important are in-game items from the store to you?
  - Why?
- What makes an item stand out to you?
  - Have you seen this item used by the streamer?
- Do you think an item is more valuable if you see your favorite streamer using it?
  - Why?

## References

- Abidin, C., & Ots, M. (2015). *The influencer's dilemma: The shaping of new brand professions between credibility and commerce*. Paper presented at the AEJMC 2015, annual conference, San Francisco, CA.
- Batchelor, J. (2018). *69% of Fortnite players have bought in-game purchases, average spend is \$85* | GamesIndustry.biz. Retrieved June 27, 2018 from <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-06-27-69-percent-of-FortNite-players-have-bought-in-game-purchases-average-spend-is-usd85>.
- Boyle, E. A., Connolly, T. M., Hainey, T., & Boyle, J. M. (2012). Engagement in digital entertainment games: A systematic review. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(3), 771–780. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2011.11.020>.
- Castronova, E., Williams, D., Shen, C., Ratan, R., Xiong, L., Huang, Y., et al. (2009). As real as real? Macroeconomic behavior in a large-scale virtual world. *New Media and Society*, 11(5), 685–707. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809105346>.
- Cha, J. (2011). Exploring the Internet as a unique shopping channel to sell both real and virtual items: a comparison of factors affecting purchase intention and consumer Characteristics. *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research*, 12(2), 115–132. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/EXPLORING-THE-INTERNET-AS-A-UNIQUE-SHOPPING-CHANNEL-Cha/64aeed0df76e5b8b0ef3801a13a2e54da38e15b0>

- Chu, S.-C., & Kim, Y. (2011). Determinants of consumer engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites. *International Journal of Advertising*, 30(1), 47–75. <https://doi.org/10.2501/IJA-30-1-047-075>.
- De la Hera, T. (2019). *Digital gaming and the advertising landscape*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 798–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035>.
- Dux, J. (2018). Social live-streaming: Twitch.TV and uses and gratification theory social network analysis. *Computer Science & Information Technology*, 100, 47–61. <https://doi.org/10.5121/csit.2018.80305>.
- Epic Games. (2017). *Fortnite* (Free-to-Play Game).
- Flick, U. (2007). *Designing qualitative research*. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208826>.
- Glas, R. (2015). Vicarious play: Engaging the viewer in let's play videos. *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication*, 5(1), 81–86. [https://doi.org/10.1386/ejpc.5.1-2.81\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ejpc.5.1-2.81_1).
- Goldsmith, R. E., & Clark, R. A. (2008). An analysis of factors affecting fashion opinion leadership and fashion opinion seeking. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 12(3), 308–322. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13612020810889272>.
- Gough, C. (2018). *U.S. Fortnite player share by gender 2018 | Statista*. Retrieved November 20, 2019 from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/865625/fortnite-players-gender/>.
- Greenheck, J., Johnson, B., Graves, A., & Oak, A. (2018). Giving meat meaning: Creating value-based connections with consumers. *Animal Frontiers*, 8(3), 11–15. <https://doi.org/10.1093/AF/VFY008>.
- Guo, Y., & Barnes, S. (2009). Virtual item purchase behavior in virtual worlds: An exploratory investigation. *Electronic Commerce Research*, 9(1–2), 77–96. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10660-009-9032-6>.
- Hamari, J. (2015). Why do people buy virtual goods? Attitude toward virtual good purchases versus game enjoyment. *International Journal of Information Management*, 35(3), 299–308. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2015.01.007>.
- Hamari, J., Hanner, N., & Koivisto, J. (2017). Service quality explains why people use freemium services but not if they go premium: An empirical study in free-to-play games. *International Journal of Information Management*, 37(1), 1449–1459. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2016.09.004>.
- Hamari, J., & Lehdonvirta, V. (2010). Game design as marketing: How game mechanics create demand for virtual goods. *International Journal of Business Science and Applied Management*, 5(1), 14–29. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00251741211203542>.
- Holin, L., & Chuen-Tsai, S. (2007). Free-to-play game challenges and massively multiplayer online game player responses. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior: The Impact of the Internet, Multimedia and Virtual Reality on Behavior and Society*, 10(5), 717–721. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2007.9963>.
- Hsiao, K. L., & Chen, C. C. (2016). What drives in-app purchase intention for mobile games? An examination of perceived values and loyalty. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, 16, 18–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eierap.2016.01.001>.
- Hsieh, J. K., Hsieh, Y. C., & Tang, Y. C. (2012). Exploring the disseminating behaviors of eWOM marketing: Persuasion in online video. *Electronic Commerce Research*, 12(2), 201–224. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10660-012-9091-y>.
- Iqbal, M. (2018). *Fortnite usage and revenue statistics (2018)—business of apps*. Retrieved July 30, 2020 from <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/Fortnite-statistics/>.
- Kati, A., Elina, K., Janne, P., Juho, H., & Jani, K. (2014). Free-to-play games: Professionals' perspectives. In: *DiGRA Nordic'14: proceedings of the 2014 international DiGRA nordic conference*. Retrieved May 29, 2014 from [http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/nordicdigra2014\\_submission\\_8.pdf](http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/nordicdigra2014_submission_8.pdf)
- Kneer, J., & Glock, S. (2013). Escaping in digital games: The relationship between playing motives and addictive tendencies in males. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29, 1415–1420. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.01.030>.
- Lehdonvirta, V. (2009). Virtual item sales as a revenue model: Identifying attributes that drive purchase decisions. *Electronic Commerce Research*, 9(1–2), 97–113. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10660-009-9028-2>.
- Lin, H.-C., Bruning, P. F., & Swarna, H. (2018). Using online opinion leaders to promote the hedonic and utilitarian value of products and services. *Business Horizons*, 61(3), 431–442. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.BUSHOR.2018.01.010>.

- Marder, B., Gattig, D., Collins, E., Pitt, L., Kietzmann, J., & Erz, A. (2019). The Avatar's new clothes: Understanding why players purchase non-functional items in free-to-play games. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 91, 72–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.09.006>.
- Nascimento, G., Ribeiro, M., Cerf, L., Cesario, N., Kaytoue, M., Raissi, C., Vasconcelos, T., & Meira, W. (2014a). Modeling and analyzing the video game live-streaming community. In *Proceedings—9th Latin American Web Congress, LA-WEB 2014*. <https://doi.org/10.1109/LAWeb.2014.9>
- Nascimento, G., Ribeiro, M., Cerf, L., Cesario, N., Kaytoue, M., Raissi, C., et al. (2014b). Modeling and analyzing the video game live-streaming community. *Proceedings - 9th Latin American Web Congress, LA-WEB, 2014*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1109/LAWeb.2014.9>.
- Oh, G., & Ryu, T. (2007). Situated play, proceedings of DiGRA 2007 conference game design on item-selling based payment model in Korean Online Games. In *DiGRA'07—Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA international conference: situated play*, 650–657. <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07312.20080.pdf>
- Park, B.-W., & Lee, K. C. (2011). Exploring the value of purchasing online game items. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27(6), 2178–2185. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CHB.2011.06.013>.
- Perry, S. (2012). Opinions are my own... and the sponsoring brand's. *Marketing magazine*. Retrieved August 29, 2012 from <http://marketingmag.ca/brands/column-opinions-are-my-own-and-the-sponsors-60808/>.
- Pornpitakpan, C. (2004a). The persuasiveness of source credibility: A critical review of five decades' evidence. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2004.tb02547.x>.
- Pornpitakpan, C. (2004b). The persuasiveness of source credibility: A critical review of five decades' evidence. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 34(2), 243–281. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2004.tb02547.x>.
- Rieger, D., Wulf, T., Kneer, J., Frischlich, L., & Bente, G. (2014). The winner takes it all: The effect of in-game success and need satisfaction on mood repair and enjoyment. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 39, 281–286. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.07.037>.
- Sjöblom, M., & Hamari, J. (2017). Why do people watch others play video games? An empirical study on the motivations of Twitch users. *Computers in Human Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.10.019>.
- Sjöblom, M., Törhönen, M., Hamari, J., & Macey, J. (2017). Content structure is king: An empirical study on gratifications, game genres and content type on Twitch. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 73, 161–171. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CHB.2017.03.036>.
- Smith, C. (2019). *50 interesting fortnite facts and statistics*. Retrieved March 18, 2019, from <https://expandedramblings.com/index.php/Fortnite-facts-and-statistics/Title>
- Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing & Health Sciences*, 15(3), 398–405. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nhs.12048>.
- Wohn, D. Y. (2014). Spending real money. In *Proceedings of the 32nd annual ACM conference on human factors in computing systems - CHI'14*, 3359–3368. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2556288.2557074>
- Wu, K. (2016). YouTube marketing: Legality of sponsorship and endorsements in advertising. *Journal of Business Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.3366/ajicl.2011.0005>.
- Wu, J., & Liu, D. (2007). The effects of trust and enjoyment on intention to. *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research*, 8(2), 128–140. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ency.21196>.