Gendered rhetoric of video game streaming: female agency, harassment and cat girls

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GENDERED RHETORIC OF VIDEO GAME STREAMING: FEMALE AGENCY,
HARASSMENT AND CAT GIRLS

by

Tommie Ann Sutton

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ABSTRACT

The streaming community is large and varied, with the most popular streamers playing video games daily for audiences of tens of thousands of people. The community is well known for its exclusion and harassment of female players and streamers, despite demographic information showing that most player populations represent an even spread amongst men and women. This study analyzes two case studies in female streamer agency: the first is an IRL streamer named Pokimane and the second on the female animated streamers called VTubers. Specifically, it shows how Pokimane disrupts gendered harassment and how VTubers ignore harassment and perpetuate stereotypes that lead to harassment of IRL streamers. The research was completed by reading supplementary texts and analysis of videos and streams. The results show that while Pokimane exerts her agency, it is locked by her privilege and limited by her gender, and while VTubers are able to resist some of the effects of harassment their agency comes at the expense of IRL streamers like Pokimane.
Introduction

Video game media is a large form of entertainment that includes not only video games, but streaming, the online social interaction that is facilitated through video games and entertainment forms that facilitate moneymaking and marketing. The community consists of more than merely players, there are people who create art and social environments off of playing games for an audience, and the community has created social rules and norms that are engaged with through not only play but also the monetization of play. Video game streaming is a socially interactive form of entertainment that transforms the video game community into an audience that has interactive and meaningful relationships with its entertainers.

For this thesis instead of merely noting the issues as they exist in the community, I want to highlight how popular female streamers utilize the agency and role given to them by the community. Pokimane is the top female streamer on Twitch.tv and in the top ten of all streamers on the website. VTubers are the top earners of super chats on YouTube.com and continue to grow their communities as they stream daily and introduce more and more characters. Pokimane is fully capable of utilizing her own channel as a tool to make herself money without having to accept rampant sexualization and while also having a nuanced personality which may not always be successful in predicting the community’s reaction. I believe that VTubers represent an idea of an ideal of femininity that sometimes gets away from them and the community that they are attempting to appease. Both cases warrant investigation as more than just mere entertainers, as video game streaming is more than just entertainment.

Pokimane uses privilege and money to combat and defy community preconceptions of what is acceptable to expect from and say to female streamers. VTubers utilize community
preconceptions of female identity to persuade their audiences into giving them financial success through donations and loyalty. VTubers reinforce the norms that Pokimane tries to combat while less successful streamers struggle with the backlash and an inability to protect themselves from it. The identities and rhetorical tools utilized by the streamers and the platforms that house them perpetuate and defy community beliefs in gender and the ideal.

**Literature Review and Chapter Outline**

The first chapter focuses on the elements of the video game community, that affect Pokimane and other in real life (IRL) female streamers. The studies mentioned focus on the prevalence of gendered violence in the community, the ways in which the violence perpetuates and happens, and the reasonings behind it. Sources of the arguments made by the research in this paper stem from communications studies, feminist studies, video games research and psychological and sociological research. In video games and computer studies research there are elements of the social effects of video game communities and the ways that video game streaming effect and reinforce those social ties.

The elements of the literature that I use as a reference point help me to show precedent for the behaviors that Pokimane has to deal with, as well as the difficulties she experiences in her own fight. Video games researcher and designer Sky LaRell Anderson writes on the ways in which Twitch the platform directs audience attention and reasons why audience members may choose to watch streams as the focus of his study. The articles “The Ingredients of Twitch Streaming: Affordances of Game Streaming”, “Content structure is king: An empirical study on gratifications, game genres and content type on Twitch” and “Why do people watch others play
video games? An empirical study on the motivations of Twitch users”, headed by Max Sjöbolm with other authors, refer to and discuss various ways in which video game streaming can be utilized to attract audiences and the reasoning that many viewers have in choosing streams to watch. These articles view streaming communities from a psychological perspective and try to present the motivation information in a way that removes gender and bias, focusing on technical elements. There are various motivations for viewers to pick streams and this aspect allows me to emphasize the size of Pokimane’s audience, while explaining reasons why people may want to watch her and the social and reciprocal elements of her stream.

Excitement to join a social community, especially an online one, is often met with the realization of the realities of that communities ingrained prejudices. There is a very prevalent idea of male majority in the video game community, and although actual demographics disprove the perception, by noting Pokimane’s discussion of her own audience we can see how the reality is not as powerful as the perception. I use multiple references to talk about the demographics, both perceived and real, of the video game community, such as sociologist Stephanie M. Ortiz, who discusses elements of racial harassment in video game streaming, and how players of color often remain silent on their race in social situations to avoid harassment (which can lead to an element of male privilege). English scholar Jacob S. Euteneuer focuses gender studies in his discussion of the exclusion in the video game community of racial and gendered identities, based on the community as well as on the video game creators themselves, who perpetuate ideas of white male majority through the games they make. Combining a psychological and gendered look at computers, Benjamin Paaßen et al. takes a look at the stereotype of the male gamer and the stereotype of female skill deficiency in video games, which is a point that must be referenced when looking at the criticism of female streamers and their abilities to play video games,
especially when inability to play is combine with the assertion that female streamer’s only purpose is to be sexualized by their audience. Shira Chess, a professor of media studies who utilizes rhetorical frameworks, discusses how prevalent harassment in video game spaces are that even academics who look to research elements of it are not immune to being targets. The hypervisibility of gender and the harassment that comes part and parcel with it does not just exist within the community, as much as it reflects and extends social preconceptions of gender identity.

Because of heightened awareness of gendered stereotyping and harassment, I also include a video games and communication study by Rosa Mikael Martey et al. on the prevalence of gender switching. The study shows the frequency of gender switching in video games and also points out that players who gender switch display behaviors indicative of ideas of stereotypical behavior of the gender they are playing. In an analysis of player progression in MMOs, Cuihua Shen et al. analyzes whether player proficiency differs between genders and uses gender and communications as their framework of video game analysis. This fits neatly with the quick analysis digital media and gender studies scholar Lisa Nakamura makes of an online blog post, stating how the difficulty of being a woman creates a difficulty level that exists outside of the game, and yet effects play. These elements are utilized in this thesis to show the difficulties that gender identity creates on female streamers who seek legitimacy and respect. Pokimane’s player ability, even though she often plays high-skill cap games, is very rarely recognized and instead it is her physical body that is the focus of her streams for the more unsavory members of the community.

Management and moderation techniques become an important element to talk about in the discussion of video game streaming because streaming is an act of labor and an act of play.
Sociologist and Media Studies scholar T. L. Taylor presents a case study of a popular Twitch streamer as the basis for her analysis of the elements of labor a full-time streamer has to manage, which reflects the labor and stream appearance that the majority of streamers, IRL or VTuber perform and utilize. The amount of time and labor that goes into streaming is also relevant to Mark R. Johnson and Jamie Woodcock’s article on how Twitch structures labor and content into moneymaking ventures via an interview-based study that focused on streamer/player interactions through donations. Rhetoric scholar Tabitha London analyzed multiple Twitch channels’ moderation practices and delivers an interesting look at the effectiveness of moderation techniques that some female streamers experience. This research is used to emphasize the amount of labor that goes into moderation practices, labor that costs money and time that some streamers don’t have access to. To emphasize the problem of privilege, I include a reference to the Rhetoric scholar Alexandra Cata’s article that presents a case study in the privilege that white male identity grants Ninja, the top streamer on Twitch, and also the disintegration of the line between work life and home life that he experiences and how harassment affects him. I also reference some of the ideas and perceptions of female streamer motivations in order to contextualize behaviors of VTubers and how commenters treat Pokimane.

While a lot of the discourse in the community is dedicated to recognizing and explaining the harassment behaviors that are prevalent, this thesis is a work that chooses to highlight how female video game streamers in the community are affected by those elements and how they choose to address it, or if they choose to address it at all1. The behavior must be detailed, analyzed and explained in order to understand the difficulties female streamers experience as well as possible motivations behind their actions. As such, I utilized research that showed effects of video games on male stereotypical behavior, such as Jonathan Burnay et al., a psychological
study of over 200 video game player’s reactions to sexualized characters in *Ultra Street Fighter IV* of how aspects of male engendered violence carry over from video games to real life. Wai Yen Tang et al. shows a correlation and frequency between sexist beliefs and behaviors attitudes towards sexual violence that expands on Tang’s earlier paper, also referenced in this thesis: “Men’s Harassment Behavior in Online Video Games: Personality Traits and Game Factors” by Wai Yen Tang and Jesse Fox, both papers analyzing surveys collected from large groups of video game players. Alessandro Gabbiadini et al. uses a communications and media studies framework to point out patterns of empathy (or lack of) in players after they play violent and sexualized video games, which is an element of the community highlighting hypermasculine violence and acceptance of that violence towards women.

The side effect of increased and prevalent violent behaviors towards women, unfortunately, is victim blaming, which is based in cultural acceptance that women often only have themselves to blame. I included Rhetorician Kristi K. Cole’s article written from a feminist perspective of not only the prevalence of violence against women, but how violence is used to discipline women for defending themselves. This is shown in my analysis of some of the comments made towards Pokimane trying to utilize a VTuber avatar. Because I want to show that the relationship between streamer and audience is reciprocal, and that streamer behavior influences audience behavior, and vice versa, Chapter 1 focuses the research I’ve cited to explain the male audience behavior while highlighting my own research to show how Pokimane responds and reacts.

VTubers find success through utilizing audience expectations of female behaviors by perpetuating and subverting sexualizations of feminine bodies. In Chapter 2, I’ll show the origins of VTubers as entertainment for a culture of men and the limitations of creative and financial
freedoms that the most popular VTubers experience. By showing the comparability of labor, with the difference in financial capability between VTubers and streamers such as Pokimane, I’ll show that VTubers allow audience members to treat them in ways that would be unacceptable for Pokimane but are so common in VTubing communities that they are not even acknowledged. This acceptance is facilitated by the separation that is acknowledged and accepted between the VTuber and the human streaming. Audiences only care about the gender of the VTuber, and so the VTuber becomes a character that is so separated from reality that it’s easy for the community to detach the inappropriateness of their actions because of the precedent that video games themselves have put on how players treat female characters. I show that with the ambiguity of streamer gender as unknown as the gender of a fellow player in a game, audience members accept that the VTuber is divorced from their real identity and support them solely based on their appearance – which is modeled after stereotypical feminine features and sexualized male fantasies. VTubers attack harassment by focusing on bullying behavior that is not sexual in nature and protects their audience by centering bad behavior on outsiders.

In Chapter 2, I utilize most of the same sources as in chapter 1, in analogous ways in order to show similarities and differences in behaviors and circumstances that VTubers and Pokimane operate in. The biggest addition to the scholarly discussion in Chapter 2 is the research of Gabriella Lukacs, who looks at the emotional labor that female virtual entertainers are performing for a male audience, and how that parallels the entertainment that VTubers provide to their fans. The biggest and most obvious tool that all streamers have is their physical form, and understanding the male perception of Pokimane’s body in chapter 1, I wanted to introduce some ideas of anime tropes and the ideas of gender that play into that, specifically the sexualization of young, beautiful, animated female characters. Kumiko Saito discusses the history of the “magical
girl” genre and its transformation from a gender role affirming media for young girls into a confused liberation that sexualizes young bodies for a male audience.

Creating another layer to the already interactive qualities of a video game, streaming provides a relationship between a player and an active audience that further enhances the world that the game exists in. It can then become a way of blurring the line between what is the player identity and what is the game, with an interactive interface providing the audience with the ability to make micro shifts in the decision-making process of the player/streamer, the stream itself becomes a game. This is extremely relevant for VTubers, whose identities are vague and whose realities appear to be separated from our own.

Methodology

Most of the research in this project has been watching countless hours of YouTube and Twitch while following Twitter stories and looking at Instagram feeds. I have read and taken a look at quite a few different kinds of sources in this paper, while most of it is focused on a feminist rhetoric viewpoint, some of my sources have a ludology background and others look at reasons behind sexist and violent behaviors of video game players. I have referenced individual interviews and some online news articles to gather information that is aligned with the ideas presented in the scholarly articles, and due to my own experience in the community I have some knowledge of how platforms and websites work that may extend beyond that of the reader of this paper, however I have taken pains to ensure that there is a minimal amount of reliance on context and a minimal amount of needless over-explanation of individual features on the websites.
Unfortunately, a large problem with doing digital research is the ephemerality of it. There are a few places in this thesis which have gone through extensive rewrites to accommodate the fact that the original source no longer exists, and as a result many of the video sources referenced are not original to the creator. As a result, while there are streamers mentioned in this thesis stream who create content for both Twitch and YouTube, all of the video sources are from YouTube. Twitch’s limited storage as well as its fickle copyright policies have led to many of the original streams mentioned in this thesis no longer exist on their original platform, and thus must be cited from video copied on YouTube. While I would like to assume that I, as a researcher, can play my part in the archival of interesting and important moments in video game streaming history, I have done my best to reference videos that I believe will not easily be removed or erased, so that full context and evidence for my arguments can be seen.

Taking these considerations in mind, the goal of this thesis is that through the analysis of the performances of gender as it appears in video game streams the reader is able to understand and recognize ways in which female streamers and audience members must navigate the community and platforms strict gendered rules and roles. The rhetoric of streaming in video games spaces centralizes and strengthens the ideas of the video gaming audience. Platforms that house video game streaming are created for a specific audience, one of white cis-gendered young English-speaking males. This community has its gender specific traits, and they are perpetuated through the money-making patterns on these platforms. The advertisers, platforms, streamers and the audience all perceive themselves as operating in an environment that centers male enjoyment.
Introducing Pokimane and Twitch

Imane Anys, also known as Pokimane (which will be used to reference her hereafter), started streaming on Twitch in 2015 and has since become one of the most followed and subscribed streamers on the platform. Born in 1996 in Morocco and raised in Canada, she speaks fluent French and English and went to McMaster University in Ontario to study engineering before dropping out to pursue a career of streaming on Twitch fulltime. Pokimane’s audience currently consists of 7.8 million followers on Twitch, and averages over 20 thousand viewers at any time. While she does stream activities other than gaming, her stream focus is video games. With a total of over 177 million views on the platform, she is not only one of the top female streamers, but also one of the top streamers on the website (Koepp).

Pokimane’s streaming appearance is very simple and in line with many other streamers who are at the height of Twitch popularity. She often plays games which are competitive, short round, team-based player vs. player games and are considered male dominated, such as League of Legends and Valorant. These games are considered to have high skill thresholds, requiring quick eye hand coordination and the ability to make immediate judgements and reactions to enemy movements. The visual focus of her streams are on the game itself: she presents herself in a small box inserted into the bottom of the screen and highlights gameplay over streamer appearance. This is extremely common among streamers no matter what level of audience they have gained (Taylor 69, Anderson 6) and is accepted in the gaming community as expected behavior while live. While there are various reasons a person may want to watch video game
streams, often entertainment is a leading element in returning to a stream. The secondary visual of a face camera and the secondary audio of a microphone provide vital elements to differentiating streamers and providing audience members with a social connection that goes beyond a purely performative relationship (Sjöbolm, et al, Ingredients 23). While Pokimane often streams alone, and is in control of her personal intellectual property, she does employ a team of managers, editors, agents, and moderators (among others) to run her stream and various YouTube channels at an expense of 10-20 thousand dollars a month (Confronting Pokimane 5:07). She often collaborates with and speaks to other players on stream during play, and the community of players she frequently collaborates with is a part of a streamer group called OfflineTV. Pokimane also produces a variety of non video game based content with them inside and outside of streaming. Her popularity and gender make her easily recognizable on the platform, given that she is the only female streamer in the top 50 of the most followed channels on Twitch.

As of December 2020, Twitch had 9.2 million “active streamers” on their platform. Of those, only 45.4 thousand are considered “partners” of the platform (Baseel). Twitch has a couple of different options for users who stream often to make money off of the content that they produce. Twitch has an in-house currency system, called “bits”, which can be bought for real money and gifted to streamers who are able to make money on the platform. You can watch, follow or subscribe to streamers with varying levels of benefits and notifications as long as you are logged into the website. Every account created on the website is given the same functionality of Twitch’s basic streaming system: a channel page, a video player, a chat box, a profile picture and a section of the page to fill in with information about the user and/or their stream. This gives everyone the potential to become active streaming members in the community, but Twitch’s
different streamer programs limit the extended functionality of some of these features and the amount of money that a streamer may be able to make off of their content. The subscription features may also change dependent on the streamer that is being subscribed to, depending heavily on their contracts with Twitch. Subscribers pay a monthly fee to watch ad free and sometimes participate in subscriber-only chat. Twitch features a promotional free monthly subscription available to use on any streamer for any user who is also an Amazon Prime member – a reminder by the website to its users of who owns the streaming platform. Streamers often remind their audience of their one free Twitch Prime subscription per month, often citing it as an affordable way of supporting a streamer they otherwise wouldn’t give money to.

The most basic connection an active streamer can have with Twitch is through the affiliate program, which is granted automatically after a streamer has gone live consistently with a minimum number of views per stream for a set amount of time and gained a minimum number of followers. Becoming an affiliate enables streamers to make money off of donations, bits and subscriptions. While the affiliate program allows streamers to make money on the platform and is achieved automatically once the streamer hits certain conditions; the next level of connection with the website, the partnership program, has no clear conditions and is processed via an application system. Partners are able to customize aspects of their stream in ways that are not available to affiliates or non-affiliated streamers. The platform runs unskippable ads on every stream as they are opened by a viewer unless they are subscribed to that channel. The ads play no matter what level of partnership a streamer has, but only Twitch partners can make revenue off of those ads. Streamers who have Twitch partnerships can also place “ad breaks” within their channel at any time, running anywhere between 30 to 180 seconds and without a skip function, requiring a viewer who is not subscribed to watch the entirety of the advertisements before being
able to continue watching a stream that is live on a platform that does not feature a rewind button. Viewers who wish to avoid ads must be subscribed to multiple streamers. Streamers are often driven to become partners and affiliates to strengthen the connections they have with their audience, retaining and enticing viewers (Taylor 74). The higher the number of subscribers, the higher the popularity and the more successful a streamer is deemed to be (Johnson 4). The amount of access and creativity in a stream vary based on amount of revenue created by popularity among paying viewers, and time spent on streaming, and thus more popular and valuable streamers have more control over their streams.

Pokimane is a prominent partner with Twitch, signing a multi-year exclusivity deal with Twitch in March of 2020 (Pokimane Reveals Exclusive Renewal). Her online presence, which helps promote her streaming platform as well as earn additional income, includes a Twitter, Instagram, a closed private Discord that opens randomly for people to join, and several YouTube channels: her main channel, Pokimane, which contains videos created from edited and curated content from her streams; Pokimane VODs, a channel were she uploads streams recorded in their entire form, unedited; and Pokimane TOO, a channel where she uploads short-form jokes or random acts and her non-video gaming channel Imane. Her professional online presence has over 7 million subscribers on YouTube, 3.2 million on Twitter and 5.7 million on Instagram, with hundreds of posts, videos, and updates on each of the platforms. Pokimane uses her different social media outlets to inform her viewers of when and what she is streaming in concurrence with Twitch push notifications that may be used by her followers to be notified when she is live. Her social media presence is enhanced by her Twitch popularity, and it is easy for her to cross over between websites to engage her audience. Her ability to reach and affect her community is, however, the rare case.
In this chapter, I demonstrate some of the ways that Pokimane embraces some aspects of her femininity as well as how she confronts community comments on her physical form. I will start by analyzing the ways that video game streaming blurs the line between what is labor and what is play, and how that confusion and the ambiguity of the amount of work that goes into streaming and the amount of money streamers actually make can create an entitlement to a streamer that Pokimane refutes by limiting donations. I show that building a community is easier for streamers who have recognizability, and the perception of male dominance in the video game community gives females a hypervisibility. Since Pokimane already has an audience, I then discuss the ways in which she genders them, which is in line with the way the audience genders itself – which leads me into a discussion of stereotypical behaviors of violence of the male community. An analysis of Pokimane’s privilege and the privilege of male streamers leads me to talk about the limitations of her agency and the non-transferability it has for other female streamers. I will finally note the limitations of her agency and her inability to remove her visibility.

**Building an Audience**

Twitch’s browsing system categorizes games with the most viewers to appear at the top of the browsing list, and in those categories streams with the most viewers are placed at the top. Pokimane often streams in a Twitch category known as “Just Chatting”, where the streamer does not have a specific game that they are playing, but instead does activities in front of the camera. When Pokimane is not playing a game, her face camera becomes the main screen, and she will interact with her audience more often. This placement and appearance lend a conversational
atmosphere to the stream, where Pokimane talks directly to the camera, addressing the on-screen donation reader, and taking on a conversational tone with the audience. She doesn’t address individuals or say chat names unless it is a fellow streamer or moderator that she knows personally.

The activities shown on the “Just Chatting” category can be exercising, eating, talking to either people in their space with them, other streamers via video calls, or even just talking to the chat. With Pokimane’s common usage of the “Just Chatting” feature, it maximizes the amount of time that she is on the top of the category. The “Just Chatting” category doesn’t have any sub-categories and most streamers use it as a placeholder category, which can cause it to fill rapidly with many more streamers than a game specific category. Twitch’s default filter sorts streams based on viewers, and with a popular streamer wrapping up playing one game, changing the stream category to “Just Chatting”, and then picking up another game, they may monopolize space at the top of the category, making it more difficult for streamers with fewer views to be noticed or pick up new viewers. Some viewers may choose streams based on either informative, entertainment, or purely visually appealing reasons when browsing for a stream to watch (Anderson 4). Because of the nature of how viewers watch Twitch, most viewers only watch a limited number of streamers, and subscribe to a much smaller number. Having a more popular stream pop up in “Just Chatting”, a viewer may pick a stream based on its popularity, interactivity and recognizability, despite the fact that they would not normally watch the games that streamer plays in their content (Sjöbolm and Hamari 987). This kind of organization issue may allow certain streamers to continue to gain viewers and followers, while other streamers may find stagnation. Pokimane uses the category as a way of varying her content, whether she wants to cook, interact with other people in her environment, or react to things online with the
chat. She also discusses current events in the community on the “Just Chatting” channel, usually as a lead into playing a game or addressing an issue that may have arisen either in a game’s development, release or amongst other players in the community. The category of “Just Chatting” becomes more than just an intermediary category while streamers are preparing to play different games. It turns into an area where streamers can engage directly with the viewers about topics that the viewers want to discuss.

Having already achieved success, Pokimane and many other of the website’s top streamers are able to maintain their viewership thanks to their recognizability and acceptance from the community as streamers who consistently get views and are entertaining. The threshold for reaching this level of popularity is difficult but is made much harder by a streamer’s race and gender. Less than 1% of the streaming community on Twitch have achieved partner status, and the website’s browsing functions favors current viewership numbers (and it doesn’t show any streamers who are not live). Adding the fact that viewers will return to streams based on entertainment value (Sjöbolm et al; Content, 164) and the categorization system is noted by its use of stills from the livestream with pictures of the streamer (Anderson 5), this results in the streamers actively making money and maintaining views being the ones who are more often highlighted by the website.

**Gendering the Audience**

Research suggests that at least 65% of Twitch users identify as male (Clement), and Pokimane often refers to her audience and community as male. There is a prevalent misconception in the online community at large that the vast majority of gamers are white males,
usually in the teenage to twenties age range (Euteneuer 117). While this misconception is popular inside and outside of online spaces (Nakamura), the truth is that the number of non-white and non-male players are not the minority (or nonexistent) that many perceive it to be, despite the fact that “the video game industry continues to create content that panders towards the presumed preferences of a young, male, heterosexual audience” (Paaßen 421). While race remains an unresearched percentage, it is noted that African-Americans tend to spend the most amount of time playing video games out of any demographic (Ortiz 572), the average age of a video game player is 34 and the female population of gamers represents 40% (Clement). The problem of the game industry continuing to produce video games for white males is that it creates a consumer community identity. That identity is communicated and advertised to as the only viable audience, “the only role to be inhabited is that of a member of the dominant hegemony” (Euteneuer 120) and the video game manufacturers and advertising agencies focus on that community whom they believe are watching, buying, and playing games. This extends also into the characters that are created in video games and video game media, often times female and BIPOC are simply “reskinned” white cis-het male characters whose gender or race has been changed at the last minute in post-production (Euteneuer 117). This perception is not correct, nor is it helpful for the minorities who do engage in play in the community.

Pokimane frequently talks about the “little boys” who watch her\(^1\) and participate in chat, often asking if her chat is old enough to be on the website.\(^2\) This kind of prescriptive dialogue ends up turning into a justification or dismissal of behavior by attributing it to individuals who

\(^{1}\) A video on her YouTube channel Pokimane called “8 YR OLD gets CHEATED on by Fortnite Girlfriend! Pokimane Random Duos!” involves her playing with a young person who says he is an 8 year old named “Ben”. Other videos on her channel reference younger viewers she has played with in random player match-games such as Fortnite.

\(^{2}\) The Terms of Service for Twitch prohibits accounts created by anyone younger than 13.
are young and don’t know any better (Reacting to my WEIRDEST Twitch Unban Requests 4:35). She often employs this kind of discourse with the purpose of explaining inappropriate and immature behavior she sees in her chat and on her stream. She addresses unfairness in streaming by focusing on the way that female streamers are treated. Her language positions female streamers as victims of unnecessary negative attention, often demeaned not for their actual abilities in game or for any inappropriate behavior they exhibit, but for existing as women who game. The focus of negativity is on visible women, who are objectified and patronized. The side effect of this language does two things, however: it furthers the narrative that the male audience can’t help themselves, that the behavior is rooted in an immaturity that stems from young age or poor upbringing and worse, it erases women in the audience. When the audience is gendered and aged, the cultural belief of who is participating in the community perpetuates.

Pokimane disrupts gendered violence against her in her streams and her chat by addressing it and contesting it. In a January 2021 stream, and again in later subsequent streams, Pokimane spent several hours of a six hour long stream time going through request forms from viewers of her stream who were banned from participating and viewing chat. Throughout the stream, Pokimane made multiple replies, such as to one request that said “I said it only for a joke” where she exclaimed “Who’s laughing? Not me!” (Reacting to my WEIRDEST Twitch Unban Requests 5:04) and to another commenter who said “I am sorry you are just cute just please unband me” she exclaimed “Unbanned? I’m sorry, you’re just so cute I couldn’t help, I couldn’t help myself from asking you to bend over ya bitch!”\(^3\) (Reacting to EVEN WEIRDERER Twitch Unban Requests (UNFILTERED) 3:30) and responded to appeals for unbans based on

\(^3\) In the original stream words are not censored, however in the YouTube video cited the word “bitch” is censored by a dog’s bark.
the history of the viewer’s comments as well as their appeal in the form. In another video she responds to a user’s chat history by saying “What compelled you to one minute say that I suck, and then the next minute talk about my breasticles and then the next minute ask to see my breasticles on stream? What compelled you?” (Reacting to EVEN WEIRDER Twitch Unban Requests (UNFILTERED) 0:24). She frequently stopped what she was doing to address and confront the ideas displayed in what she and her moderators have determined to be behavior that will result in a permanent ban, describing why she thinks it is inappropriate or to denounce the behavior as hurtful.

Stereotypically masculine behavior of domination, aggression and violence are very common in not only video games but also amongst the male players who enjoy them (Tang and Fox 513). Video games may also exacerbate violent behaviors by reinforcing them in their narratives, and there may be correlations between the behaviors that are exhibited in video games and the way that players act in game and in real life (Burnay 216). Emphasis of masculine attributes in video games reinforces toxic masculine attitudes and beliefs that male players identify with, leading to decreased feelings of empathy (Gabbiadini 7). The lack of empathy is emphasized when the person being harmed is a female.

Gendered violence exhibits itself in generally recognizable ways (Tang et al 131) and moderation tactics on Twitch vary slightly from stream to stream, but a common element of them is the amount of time and energy that is required from the streamer or person in charge of the chat. Oftentimes in situations of extreme harassment a streamer on Twitch may choose to ignore toxicity in their chats. The issue with ignoring this behavior, however, becomes that when the streamer ignores behavior, the audience either sees that behavior as acceptable and emulates it, or is unnerved by it and removes themselves. Moderation tactics that involve strictly enforcing
rules and punishing bad behavior, especially by specifically calling it out on stream, are the most effective forms of moderation (London 62). A problem with this form of moderation is that it requires an intense amount of emotional and physical labor to be exerted by the streamer and their moderation team (if they have one). The burden of “regulation and enforcement rests on streamers, their communities, and general viewers who also have the ability to block and report fellow users” and as a result is often inconsistent (London 58). Moderation teams also represent labor and money burdens that many new or less popular streamers may be unable to take on, furthering the fact that streaming is labor and money intensive. You must have either money or luck, but most importantly of all, privilege, in order to get bigger on the platform. This privilege often manifests itself in the gender identity of the streamer, where female streamers find themselves with extra labor, they must perform in order to stream successfully.

In video game culture there is a preconception of an individual’s identity in a game as presenting either male or female, but a player’s identity is always male. This conception can be rooted in the fact that most players gender swap in game (Martey 293), that is, they choose an avatar that is not representative of their personal gender identity. It is an extremely common perception in the online media community that women do not participate in video games, online forums or chat rooms. This is often enhanced by the knowledge that so many players gender switch. Due to lower usage of in game voice chat, “female players who are performing the role of gamer are unlikely to be identified as female” (Passen 427) causing players to often assume that anyone that they meet in a game will be male in real life. “Masculinity is performed by the display of technical knowledge, and gaming is the most recent iteration of this form of social

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4 Labor is considered a form of money in this instance, as streamers who do not have to work outside of streaming are only able to do so because they already have money.
display” and “gaming capital is assumed to be intrinsically masculine”, are facts of this community, the reality of demographics be damned (Nakamura). Ideas of gender and player ability are also affected by society’s gendered views on genius and mastery (Paaßen 421). Female players also have the reputation of not being “serious” gamers, they either lack the ability and mastery in order to succeed in games (Shen 313) or they forgo “hardcore” games all together (Paaßen 425). For gamers, the conception remains that female gamer represent an almost mythical population, one that does not exist and, even if it did, would not represent any kind of serious percentage.

The stereotype of male majority leads to a condition of heightened visibility of female streamers in the community; however this does not equal success in the world of video game streaming, rather it creates an environment for female streamers to incur violence and harassment, even for female writers and audience members who make themselves known in the community (Chess and Shaw 211). So far, we have established a lack of empathy that arises from perpetuation of toxic masculine ideals and attitudes in video games and the perpetuating false conception of a significant white male majority of the video game community, how this is recognized and accepted by male and female members of the community, and we have established the environment in which female players (and streamers) exist in. The attitude towards female members of the community is hostile and exclusionary (Nakamura). They are othered, or their contributions to the streaming community are diminished in favor of highlighting attributes that are not relevant to their streams. The resulting behavior, exemplified for streamers in the way that fellow streamers and audience members in the chat speak to them, is violence towards their presence, appearance and validity as member of the community.
Despite Pokimane’s qualifications as a top streamer – her skill in playing has taken her to
tournaments as well as contributed to her success as a top viewed streamer on Twitch – the
community often perpetuates ideas of female streamer’s successes being based in their looks
rather than their abilities. There is often the claim that female streamers are “camwhores,” a title
which is supposed to indicate that the female streamers are using their bodies to encourage their
audiences, which again, are perceived as male, to give them money (Kotaku). This is also
frequently represented in how audiences talk to streamers, where female streamers have their
physical attributes highlighted and commented on over and over again in chat. The lack of
empathy towards female identities in communities where those identities are marginalized and
ignored reinforces the community beliefs that female streamers have only themselves to blame
for their own harassment.

Violence against women in online spaces is almost always met with the sentiment that it
was somehow deserved, or that the violence only happens because women make themselves
targets for men through their own decision to present themselves. This reaction is shown in
parallel online environments, where female bodies are victimized and violence against them
diminished in order to punish individual agency (Cole 356). This is commonly seen in the case
of non-consensual porn, where the blame is put on the person who is in the photos or video
rather than on the person who is actively sharing and distributing the material, whether for
monetary gain or as an act of violence motivated by the belief that the person who originated the
material deserves it (Velez 458). Harassment, most often in the form of sexual harassment, in the
streaming community becomes a female problem, not a community problem. The violence is
preventable, according to the community, by simply not participating in behaviors which
encourage harassment; however, there is no way to exist in a way that does not “encourage”
harassment when existence itself becomes the reason why these individuals are harassed. Sexualization of streamers is common, but demonizing a streamer’s own decisions to show parts of themselves is just as prevalent, and harassment is usually singularly targeting the streamer’s gender despite purposeful self-sexualization of not (Cata 139).

Even though Pokimane is a full-time streamer who plays games all day she still performs labor for an audience and gets paid to do so, in a myriad of ways. When you combine socially accepted ideas such as “women are sexual objects” and “girls aren’t good at video games” you get to an interesting conclusion: that what female streamers do isn’t valuable as labor or entertainment, because the purpose of a female video game streamer is to be sexualized (Cata 141).

**The Blur Between Play and Labor and Moneymaking on Stream**

Often watching video game streams is considered “counterintuitive” when the audience could simply play the game themselves (Anderson 3). There are differing motivations for viewers in their initial determinations for why they will watch live streamed content, whether it’s for information on a game being played, social interaction with other members of the community, interactivity with the streamer, or for purely entertainment purposes (Sjöbolm and Hamari 987). Whatever the reason, audience members continue to go back to the same streamers based on the structure of their performances more than the genre or types of games that they are playing (Sjöbolm et al; Content, 164). Streamers who perform in specific ways garner more devotion from viewers, who will watch them whether they are invested in the specific game or not, which, consequently, can inspire the viewers to pick up and start playing that game (Sjöbolm
et al; Content, 168). Since game selection is often requested by the audience, we see that the relationship is reciprocal and interactive. These elements are further affected by gender, since ideas of performance and proficiency are not gender neutral in the video game community.

While often there is confusion as to the value of video game streaming as a job, companies looking to sell products do not appear to have any qualms making money off stream audiences, and the legitimization of video game streaming as a form of labor is correlated to the amount of money that the top streamers make. The way that streamers make money can be confusing and oblique: money can be made from advertising, viewer donations of either cash or bits, viewer monthly subscriptions and gifted subscriptions. There may also be brand deals, management companies, moderators, merchandising, all of which provide expenses and revenue to a streamer (Johnson 4). An example of this can be seen in the stream feed of Ninja; the top streamer on the platform has a mini fridge full of red bull positioned just next to his chair, keeping it constantly in frame as he plays, probably as a result of his brand deal with Red Bull (Welcome to the fam Tyler “Ninja” Belvins). Pokimane also has multiple brand deals, which she started receiving early in her streaming career long before she had reached her current popularity. An interesting point, noting that viewers watch streamers based on structure of the stream more than the game being played, brought up in an interview, describes how her first potential advertising deals were made by companies who were more interested in the opportunity of space to advertise, rather than compelled by her then growing audience. Advertisers seem more concerned with reaching an active audience than the potential that a streamer may have for growing an audience. We can also presume that advertisements do not indicate any effort or work put into a stream as long as the stream offers a minimum threshold of an audience. Pokimane said herself that the moment she realized she was accepting upwards of 10 thousand
dollars a month in brand deals alone was when she could start streaming fulltime as a job (Confronting Pokimane 1:35).

The idea of “streaming fulltime” seems to be a complicated one, as it confuses the separation between labor and play, often almost disintegrating for streamers the line between what is home life and what is work life. Playing a game, interacting with chat, keeping track of individual viewer interactions such as donations, follows and subscriptions, moderating and performing are all activities that a streamer must engage in, and that is just while they’re online. Social media engagement, brand deals and advertisements, agents, management, scheduling concerns, working with video games and Twitch itself become invisible forms of necessary labor in order to continue to stream and make money, complicating the difference between labor and play for the streamer and the audience (Taylor 66). There is also the technical aspect of streaming: the necessity of hardware, advanced internet connections, paid programs that assist and control streaming, as well as the maintenance of these items, provide their own individual problems and labor. Streamers can and do stream for hours on a given day, sometimes multiple days in a row, and often during odd hours, starting in the afternoon and streaming until the late night or early morning to maximize their viewership and engagement. These will, in turn, effect partner and affiliate status with Twitch (Cata 140).

Perhaps due to the confusing boundaries of what is considered labor and what is just play there can be some misunderstanding on the audience’s part of what is appropriate to say or assume. It is these “features of the gaming environment, such as the lack of co-location and

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5 This element is even more complicated by the fact that streamers often live with their families or a group of people in a team, employing members of their families to help them with the business aspect of streaming as streaming becomes more and more business focused. Many streamers will have members of their families and spouses working with and for them as business partners (Taylor 67).
player anonymity,” that can promote harassment and other behaviors that would not happen in normal peer-to-peer conversation (Tang and Fox 514). Assumptions about a streamer’s real life, relationships, habits and money can create friction between an audience and a streamer. As streamers are often in their own homes for the entirety of the stream, and are actively interacting with the audience, there becomes a growing familiarity between the streamer and the audience as a whole. The need to directly address behaviors that are shown as common, but inappropriate, is present for any streamer, but how they approach that behavior and how it is targeted is directly reflective of the streamer’s gender and race. As a popular female streamer, Pokimane’s stream chat is often punctuated with inappropriate behavior which is often caught by her extensive team of mods, who watch her streams as they are happening. They may block someone from viewing chat, time them out for a set amount of minutes from the chat box, or directly interact with the chat by guiding conversations or reiterating rules. Moderators also have the ability to view any chat user’s previous chat logs and can make decisions on how to punish audience members. The large number of moderators are one of the most effective tools that Pokimane has, since moderating is time consuming and labor intensive. Pokimane also has multiple monitors and a computer that allows her to run a large number of programs that allow her to communicate in real time with her mods, seamlessly.

In 2019, Pokimane worked with the company that programs her chat bot, StreamLabs, and created a program that limited donations to nothing over 5 dollars. Donations are a way for any viewer to give money to the streamer for whatever reason they choose. Donations are not transactional in the sense that the donator receives an item or a good in return for the donation, but instead they are given with an understanding that they are supporting the streamer to create content more frequently (Johnson, 4). Donations and subscriptions create a steady financial
source for streamers that facilitates the ability for the streamer to survive off of, as opposed to supporting themselves via a job outside of streaming. As soon as a donation is filled, a text box noting the donating viewer, the amount of money and sometimes a small note written by the donator appears in the chat box. Some streams, such as Pokimane’s, have accompanying animations that appear on the live stream video, as well as sounds or text-to-speech readers that will read off the donation note. The on-screen reader for donations is also a common element in streamer set ups due to the frequency of donations and ease of use it provides for both the streamer and the audience to be able to hear and interact with donation comments. In the case of Pokimane’s stream her text to speech reader only reads the note written by the donator, leaving out the amount of money and the name of the donator. This creates a proxy voice for the donator to vocalize their message. This vocalization is directly engaged with – Pokimane will respond to any questions asked, she will stop talking and listen to the text to speech, and she will thank the donator without saying their name.

For Pokimane, placing a cap on donations removes an illusion of financial dependence on her viewers and instead reinforces the donations as a way for her and her viewers to interact. Donations of 2 dollars or more pop up on the livestream and any text typed by the donator is read out on her text-to-speech program in a male-coded voice. She has stated that she does not view relying on donations and subscribers to be a viable source of income (Confronting Pokimane 4:10), and that she felt the desire to incentivize viewers who would give money to her to instead give that money to streams that didn’t have the viewershup and visibility that she did or to instead

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6 An interesting note is that users may be “banned” from a channel, preventing their use and visibility of the chat box and so the only way they can read donation comments is if they pop up on-stream.

7 The voice of the text-to speech is robotic and easily recognized as non-human, however there are options between male- and female-coded voices. Pokimane would have had to choose the male-coded voice, a decision which might be based on how she views the gender of her audience.
spend the money on themselves (Pokimane announce). Making a statement removing the importance of money received directly from her audience\textsuperscript{8} connects and prioritizes the audience and play aspect of the stream.

Her current donation system does not prioritize amongst the text-to-speech donations, but it does prioritize the text-to-speech donations over lower amounts. While she does imply that she doesn’t need donations in order to continue to play, and that no one needs to donate to her, having a minimum donation amount in order to have the donation played via text-to-speech makes these interactions hierarchical. Because the audience is not individualized the audience starts to become a single entity that ends up talking and interacting with Pokimane in ways that are common and indicative of how the community treats women and because the on-screen reader is male coded and she refers to her audience as male, her audience becomes a proxy for a stereotypical male viewer. The text-to-speech male-coded voice creates a voice of the audience: male, has disposable income, frequently interrupts Pokimane while she talks and uses money as a way to reinforce a relationship between her and the audience as a whole. Subscriptions can work in a very similar way, as “By supporting a streamer and following them, the person can develop a deeper involvement with the community and feel involved in a larger part of the communities shared experience” (Sjöbolm and Hamari 992). The deindividualization works to remove the perception of Pokimane’s reliance on the community, but the elements of the male voice and the prioritization amongst donations still place gender and value on the audience identity and are an imperfect solution to Pokimane’s problem of distancing her physical identity as a woman and her most visible way of making money from a male audience.

\textsuperscript{8} It should be noted that it does not remove the value of the viewer’s presence and subscriptions for the Twitch website and potential advertisers.
Pokimane is, unfortunately, still limited by the whims of male streamers who can exert more agency than she can. Harassment and violence effects male streamers as well, but their reaction is not to combat the community’s beliefs and norms on the acceptable behaviors towards streamers but to remove the perceived cause of the harassment: female players and streamers. Male streamers, especially streamers of color, may choose to ignore harassment completely, brushing off verbal attacks as an element of playing the game. Positions of power on Twitch belong to mostly white and mostly male streamers, and inequality can be shown not only in female and BIPOC exclusion, but also in the way that audiences treat female and BIPOC streamers (Ortiz 574).

In 2018, Ninja, the top streamer on Twitch, made a statement in an interview saying that he would no longer play on stream with female streamers as a way to combat growing accusations of his infidelity with those streamers. Ninja’s wife works as his manager, navigating his social media presence and acting as his representative to companies and brands. When he streams, he often collaborates with various different streamers, male and female alike; and with the common knowledge that he is married along with the cultural view of female harassment being acceptable and the fault of the female streamers, his community felt emboldened to accuse him of cheating on his wife with the female streamers. Ninja, who spends so much of his life on stream or managing his streams, experiences an inability to separate his personal life from his professional one. The audience, the viewers of his streams and the people who interact with his social media, become a part of his personal life, and so the behaviors of the audience directly
affect him, just like how it directly affects female streamers. The difference lies in Ninja’s ability to remove himself from harassment. His way of fighting inappropriate audience behaviors was to remove what he felt was the source of the behavior, female streamers, instead of addressing the issue at hand: that community attitudes towards women encourage viewers and streamers to objectify their bodies and their presence. Removing women from his streaming feeds did nothing to erase an issue that women have to deal with everyday in video game and streaming spaces, but instead allowed him to blame audience bad behavior on those who are victimized. As Alexandra Cata puts it: “due to Ninja’s status as a celebrity, he has the privilege to pick and choose what he does and who he associates with. By choosing not to stream with women, he is purposely avoiding issues of marginalization towards women and minorities on Twitch and blocking them from accessing his social and economic capital.” (Cata, 134). Ninja’s celebrity status can be attributed to his sex and race. While there were many in the community who supported his decision as a way of protecting himself and his family, many others have pointed out how he uses his social capital on Twitch to ignore issues rather than addressing them.

A problem with the discussion of agency is who gets to exert that agency and how effective it can be in a culture where visibility becomes the means of obtaining success. Pokimane’s avenues of resistance are not available to everyone on the platform, much less other women on the platform. While hypervisibility can be an issue for female players, more often than not that hypervisibility only results in harassment, while players of color experience issues with receiving any visibility at all. The issues of visibility are exacerbated by the website’s own format and set up, which focuses screenshots of livestreams (Anderson 5) and filters based on current viewers. Ninja’s ability and agency in creating and curating his own streaming space, which is incredibly successful, takes advantage of elements of the system of Twitch and societal
understandings of gendered interactions and focuses of blame. Female streamers are treated in specific ways because the people within the system who have benefited the most from it are able to ignore and perpetuate those behaviors that target females.

**Visibility and VTubing**

Females in streaming experience this burden of hypervisibility and reduction of agency, and if removing the perceived element of the harassment works for men, why wouldn’t it work for women? The reason for harassment is often noted as being the female streamer herself, and so removing the streamer from the stream, while still facilitating the stream, may seem like an interesting workaround with potential for success. In September 2020, Pokimane aired a Twitch stream where she featured an animated version of herself that is commonly referred to as a “VTuber” by the online streaming community. VTubers are called so because they are “Virtual YouTubers”, animated and purely virtual streamers who create content on streaming websites. The style change of her stream came about as a way for her to express herself, go live, and continue to work without the pressure of physically looking good on stream. Unfortunately, there was a significant backlash in her community, the video gaming community at large, and in the VTuber community as well, focusing on her removal of what the audience deems as her most important quality: her body and the ability for the audience to sexualize it.

The community had multiple reactions to the stream, but the majority decided it was problematic for a variety of reasons: claiming that Pokimane was hopping on the trend of VTubers, accusing her of manipulating the existing VTuber community and the anime fans in her own community into giving her more money, trying to branch into VTubing despite already
being known for showing her face and in fact that her popularity is based on her face, and some criticisms of the model, saying it looked exactly like her real body, it was ugly, or that it was overly simplistic (what vtubers REALLY think about pokimane, 4:40, Pokimane "RUINS" The Vtuber Community, 7:13). The money manipulation accusations are not limited to her VTuber streams, although the VTuber model seemed to have influenced a new wave of criticism. In fact, money manipulation is a criticism often hurled at female streamers (Cata 141). Many comments with thousands of likes each on quite a number of YouTube videos referencing Pokimane say things such as “"Your audience consists of boys, lotion, and a box of tissues." Holy shit you killed her dude.” (Why I don't like Pokimane), “S to the I the M to the P Donate your entire life salary” (The Lamentable Tale of POKIMANE), “She's not that bad. I feel like people go way to hard on her just because she's a girl.” (Why do People Hate Pokimane), “I think pokimane has more simps but neekolul’s simps are more hardcore EDIT: For the people saying Pokimane's simps are going bankrupt or homeless donating money for her, I commented this before they started living in poverty due to their amount of donations.” (Whose Simps are Worse? (Pokimane vs. Neekolul)), “I love how pokimane doesn’t act like herself and just puts on a face of lies” (I Am FED Up With Pokimane…), “Pokimane: “Imagine hiding your face behind a virtual avatar.” Also Pokimane: 0:15 HERACY!” (Pokimane has become a Vtuber to entice me | Let the meme's begin!).⁹ All of these comments are ways that the male community comes together to try and punish Pokimane for not only exerting her agency (Cole 356), but also trying to fight against the pigeonhole of looking beautiful all the time.

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⁹ Every comment chosen here had a minimum of 1000 individual “likes”, with the “you killed her dude” comment at 4.2 thousand likes at time of writing.
Part of the VTuber community was angered because of the perceived competition that Pokimane’s new stream identity was going to create. As pointed out by a variety of VTubers in the community, Pokimane creating and streaming a VTuber model of herself created quite a bit of awareness of the community, thus increasing the potential audience (what vtubers REALLY think about Pokimane, 6:45). The main criticism of her launch of the model goes back to the accusations of her manipulating audience members into giving her money, and many of the YouTube videos quoted above and on the website criticizing her go back to her overstepping an illusory boundary into a new community with the sole goal of manipulating members for their money by utilizing her looks. The ever-present idea is that the community only values Pokimane’s physical form (Cata 139), and her struggle to constantly reaffirm her own agency over her form is at odds with both her career and her audience, which seem to culturally try and reinforce the idea that her physical form is the only reason for her success.

The way that Pokimane addresses her own harassment is by putting herself in a place of power over her space. Her stream becomes an area that anyone can view, but only viewers who do not act outside of acceptable limits may participate in. Silencing harassers via moderation becomes necessary for the stream to maintain peace and a community that will engage in the stream at its face value instead of attacking Pokimane based on her identity. One comment that appeared to be from a stream she did in early 2021 and was highlighted in one of Pokimane’s unban videos was “how am I supposed to get hard when ur facecam is an animation”10 (Reacting to my WEIRDEST Twitch Unban Requests, 4:42), which clearly indicates an entitlement by the audience member to Pokimane’s body. Using an avatar instead of her actual feed works like a livestream with no camera, the avatar represents her, but it does not replace her, however the

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10 Pokimane’s reaction was to lay on the floor and say “I’m just thinking about life man. How did I get here?”.
response from the audience and critics appear to disagree. This isn’t just an issue with IRL streamers trying to branch into VTubing; streamers who do no camera streams often find that their viewership goes down significantly, and this can be extremely stressful on the streamers who realize that they may have to choose between harassment and loss of viewership, which can lead to loss of revenue (Polygon). Pokimane’s main motivation in the decision to create a VTuber model was to “turn off” the comments about her physical appearance in her video streams. Comments on her VTuber model don’t affect her the way that comments on her actual body do, and she wanted to relieve herself of the worry about her body positioning and how she looks on camera (Pokimane Talks About Her VTuber/VRoid Model, 0:30). This allows her a way of connecting with her audience while also relieving herself of the labor of perfecting her appearance to audience and community standards, an issue due to the scrutiny of analysis done to female streamers by male audience members (Tang and Fox 518).

As shown in the responses to Pokimane’s stream and the responses that the community often has to female streamers at large (Paaßen 422), it would appear that the limitations the community places on the value of female streamers may prevent them from achieving success without having their physical identities closely tied to that success, whether they want it that way or not (Polygon). The negative reaction to the VTubing stream had two clear forms: one from the side of VTubing community members who felt the need to defend their own positions as members of a community attacking an outsider trying to “cash in” on success, and the other from the streaming community that felt upset that she was not showing her “actual” face. Pokimane’s

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11 An assumption seems to be that because advertisers appear to only care about consistent views, they would not desire deals with viewers who are constantly losing viewership.
audience, as well as audience members of other female streamers feel entitled to a female streamer’s appearance.

**Conclusion**

This physical expectation continues to show how Pokimane is affected by her audience’s expectations of her and how the standards and behaviors of her streaming audience remain different from the standards and behaviors of a male streamer (Nakamura). Pokimane strives to maintain a connection to her audience in ways that fight prevalent ideas of entitlement to female bodies and she uses tools at her disposal, granted to her by her popularity and success, to maintain a clear distinction of what is and is not appropriate, as well as denouncing and actively rejecting her financial dependency on the audience. Pokimane’s audience expects different things form her than other (male) streamer’s audiences, and its often unreasonable demands of time, energy and labor that are denied based on what Pokimane feels she is capable of giving. Backlash to this denial is often violence.

The result of minimizing female presence in audiences due to the perception that the majority identity of video game players is male justifies behaviors by contributing them to players who don’t know any better because of age or ignorance on how to properly behave. It perpetuates sexualized violence and creates an environment that continues to diminish the value of female streamers. This environment also believes that female discomfort is a result of a female streamer’s own actions and minimizes empathy towards victims of harassment, race-based and sex-based. Unfortunately for other streamers, the ability to remove themselves from financial dependence on the community that attacks and devalues them is not always possible, and the
forces of resistance are often labor intensive and exhausting (if not impossible for streamers who can not afford to hire moderators). Thus, female streamers who do not share Pokimane’s incredible position of privilege and agency may choose to simply leave the community altogether.
Chapter 2

*Introducing VTubers and YouTube*

In the previous chapter we briefly looked at a stream where Pokimane had utilized an animated avatar of herself that used body tracking software to copy her movements while she was live streaming a video game. While the reception that she received was mostly negative and she has not continued to revisit that element of video game streaming, there is a sizable community of virtual streamers and an even larger audience of people who watch and enjoy them. This chapter will focus on a different approach to agency than the one that Pokimane exhibits, one utilized by VTubers who play as characters divorced from the real people who perform them. There is an interesting non-transferability of the invisibility that VTubers experience vs. the hypervisibility of Pokimane. I show how virtual streamers utilize their digital personas to shield themselves from the sexual harassment that IRL streamers undergo, and yet despite this, they still actively perpetuate and reinforce the norms and behaviors that allow the gendered stereotypes and structures to continue in the video game community. Often the perpetuation of these norms works to gain VTubers large followings and allows them to make large sums of money from their fans through donations.

In my argument about how Pokimane uses her position to fight harassment in Chapter 1, we see that there is a lot of discussion of violence perpetuated on female and BIPOC bodies in online spaces. Looking back at the violence of male behavior as the expected and accepted behaviors of the community, there are inherent ideas in the community that encourage audiences to accept female streamer inferiority when it comes to performance of gaming ability as they are
often considered stereotypically male activities (Shen 315) a fact which causes men to self-
identify as gamers at a much larger number than women (Paaßen 426) and video games
themselves “may be prone to fostering hostility which may translate into negative social
interaction” (Tang and Fox 514) and often encourage the behaviors that audience members
exhibit by reinforcing negative audience expectations, such as perceiving women in overly
sexualized ways (Burnay 219). That violence is perceived as being the victim’s fault, and often
entrance into an online space by women or BIPOC players is perceived as an act of trespassing
by the video gaming community (Nakamura). The only modes of defense for the violence that
the community enacts on female streamers are to enforce intense moderation practices (London
62) or to remove themselves from part of the streaming process through no cam streams or
switching platforms, often at their own expense. Those options have varying levels of success
and accessibility depending on streamer success, privilege, and money. VTubers take a different
approach: they provide a curated entertainment experience that is based on the video game
community’s cultural expectations of women’s behavior and its purpose as a sensory experience
for men (Lukacs 497). They utilize audience expectations of female behaviors to create success
for themselves.

There are many virtual entertainment precursors to VTubers on the internet and looking
at them helps to see the evolution of virtual entertainment as it moves farther away from the real
life streaming that Pokimane participates in. Centered in Japan, the net idols of the 90s and early
2000s were female high schoolers, young women and middle-aged housewives who created
entertainment through diaries and photos, creating communities that would follow their lives as
they post in online spaces (Lukacs 491). Vocaloids are virtual creations that utilize the Vocaloid
digital singing software owned by Yamaha (Werde). Vocaloids are virtual entertainers with
backgrounds, characterizations and images based entirely on fictionalizations. In social media spaces there are also virtual influencers, animated personas who create content in the same way that real life influencers do. Some, such as Ami Yamato, are vloggers with scripted videos, and upload content that is later edited to insert the animated character, while others create social media posts and advertisement videos and work as social media influencers. These influencers are created by individuals who animate them and post for them on schedules, and the gender and identity of the creative team may be completely different from that of the virtual influencer.

VTubers first appeared in the middle of the 2010s when Kizuna AI’s channel was created in 2016. Kizuna AI is a VTuber who is controlled by a team of animators and a voice actor and her popularity grew quickly, reaching 2 million subscribers by 2018. Utilizing virtual models that copy inputs from face tracking software to move, they are different from pure animation and their movement is not scripted or choreographed by an animator (Shirai 2). VTubers can appear in multiple different styles, genders, ages and nationalities, however they are mostly characterized by the Japanese animation style and are often light skinned, young and female. The use of 2D animated style in a 3D animated form is extremely common in VTuber avatars.

While Chapter 1 focuses specifically on Pokimane, I chose to condense and generalize my analysis of VTuber culture in this Chapter to focus more on the behaviors common amongst the group and to emphasize the lack of individual identity that is heightened in this community. While each VTuber has its own style, likes/dislikes and personality, as well as their own specific fan base, they all fit into conventional themes which can be used to accurately describe them all. Thus, while I do mention specific VTubers throughout the chapter, the behaviors and tropes of the community can be seen in the majority of streams. VTubers exist in this space where they are this idealized form of an entertainer for a community that desires its entertainers to be
consumable, because of their ambiguous real-life identities as well as their manipulation of popular gender conventions.

The types of VTubers that are most common and most popular are hypersexualized and often age ambiguous female characters. This marketing is purposeful and utilizes decades old techniques for marketing anime and media of women to young men (Saito 152). VTubers very commonly feature appearances that mimic tropes found in Japanese anime and manga: large heads and eyes with diminutive mouths and noses. Heterochromia is very common, as is unnatural eye colors and very often VTubers will have hair in varying natural and unnatural colors with highly intricate hair styles. They usually have very similar body types, generally appearing very thin with long legs and wide hips and very small feet. Most VTuber personalities have animal features, such as animal ears, tails, and teeth. A case in point could be shown with HoloLive’s EN branch, which has five personalities all creatively focusing on mythological or fictional characters and anthropomorphizing all but one of them into creature/human hybrids, including a shark girl, a phoenix/human hybrid, a woman with multiple tentacles, a grim reaper, and a human detective. The largest variances between VTuber bodies are often differences in height and breast size and any anthropomorphic qualities they may possess. VTubers very frequently feature very intricate costumes and outfits and will “debut” new outfits for special occasions. The features that VTubers display are often associated with cuteness, and they represent ways in which VTubers emulate and embody physical reinforcements of male ideas of gender roles (Saito 146), ones which clearly desire fantasy over reality and perpetuate ideals of gendered norms.

Many VTubers originate in Japan, however it is not a phenomenon that is limited to Japanese speakers and audiences. In terms of content, there may be multiple forms of
entertainment that VTubers produce, and while most VTubers stream video games on YouTube many also have secondary video focuses, such as singing, and many VTubers are also professional musicians. Some VTubers have educational content, such as Kureiji Ollie, a zombie girl who is part of HoloLive’s Indonesia branch, who has streams which seek to explain algebra and math formulas to the audience, or any of the several multilingual VTubers who will often hold streams either teaching other VTubers languages and grammar or learning a language through an app or game. There are even some streams where the VTubers will do real world activities and simply narrate them to the audience while the avatar records the performer’s movements and facial expressions with either no camera footage or camera footage of the activity without the person doing them in frame ([ASMR] Nyanners; Kaoru Beyblade ASMR). One of the biggest differences between VTubers and previous iterations of virtual entertainers is the aspect of video game streaming.

Money as a Form of Community Connection

VTuber streams are set up in a visually similar way to how Pokimane’s stream was described in the previous chapter, which is the most common and popular way to stream (Anderson 6). When there is a game or video being played on screen, the VTuber avatar will sit to the side and minimized to highlight the action of the visual (Taylor 69), while when they are directly addressing the chat, the avatar will become larger and take up the majority of space on the screen. Often professional VTubers will post weekly schedules showing fans their streaming

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12 There are also many VTubers who stream on Twitch, including the VShoujo talents and many indie VTubers. Twitch VTubers are majority English speaking and will upload copies of their twitch streams onto YouTube in the same manner as Pokimane.
plans, which will include times and genres for the streams they will be running during the week. The streams often last for a couple of hours, are daily, and not only will they sometimes stream multiple times in one day, but VTubers will often participate in collaboration streams with other VTubers. This means that a VTuber may stream once a day on their own channel and collaborate with another VTuber on that same day on a different channel. Often Twitch IRL streamers have a consistent schedule, with set times and days and content that is not announced ahead of time and collaboration is more often streamed simultaneously during their regular streaming time. The amount of time and labor that goes into streaming fulltime as a VTuber is proportional to IRL streamers. VTubers stream for shorter periods but create massive amounts of content, maintain presences on social media, and maintain their identities as performers (and not as real people). The devices that VTubers use are slightly different since they employ tracking and animation software instead of cameras.

Management through companies are a popular option for VTubers, and for lesser-known talents or streamers who are looking into entering the community, management connections also help VTubers gain popularity. There are multiple different well known VTuber companies, and the most popular and well-known companies, such as HoloLive, Nijisanji, and NoriPro are Japanese, often have talent searches, and present new character releases in groups called “generations”. In an interview with Motoaki Tanigo the CEO of Cover Corporation, the company that owns HoloLive, Kiryu Coco, a dragon woman VTuber with HoloLive, asked what are the three main traits that HoloLive looks for in potential VTubers, Motoaki Tanigo listed desire to stream, due to the intense labor schedule, experience in the form of being able to keep composure in front of tens of thousands of viewers and a specific special skill, something that they can perform in a stream for an audience. It is interesting to note that while gaming skill was
the first listed, HoloLive considers singing, gaming, art, video editing and specifically “Having a form of expression that [they’re] good at” as “pretty important to life as a VTuber” (HERE IT IS GUYS 6:21). Management companies provide protection in the form of moderators and managers and assistance in their streaming through character models, advertisements and publicity. Pokimane controls her mods, management and her social media presence, but VTubers operate based on contracts that restrict and limit the control that they have over their own actions in exchange for moderation, technical assistance and management.

The ever-growing number of VTubers can create a bit of an illusion that success in the VTuber world is easy and accessible. Individual IPs of the VTuber characters can vary amongst companies and individual performers, but almost all of the most successful VTubers that are created are owned by their management company. At times teams can go into the creation and work of virtual entertainers, such as with Kizune AI. There are lots of individuals who own, create, and maintain their own VTuber identities and media presence, and those are often referred to as “indie” performers. Although they do not benefit from the wide networks of the management companies, often losing their IPs to the company or having to completely change it for their contracts is a motivating factor in why they do not join management companies (Juniper talks 1:20). There is a notable difference in the potential amount of labor performed in that female IRL streamers have to “prepare” for streams by physically preparing their bodies to look a certain way that conforms to viewer and community expectations. This preparation, and the inconvenience of it, is noted in the previous chapter, but it is important to point out that because of the illustrated aspect of the VTuber streams, there is a secondary act of labor that involves designing, illustrating and rigging the appearance and movement of the VTuber character. Often this job is contracted out and is completed long before the VTuber’s first stream – representing
the money, time and labor that has to be supplied before the VTuber can even begin to stream. But it should be noted that these designs are extremely expensive customized models with a high range of motion and facial expressions and they are not the most common type of VTuber, just
that success in the VTuber community is usually reliant on a higher quality figure. Entry into the community as a VTuber is free and easy for anyone who has a computer, an internet connection and a webcam or a mobile phone since most of the software available is free to download with pre-made base characters and features.

One of the primary forms of moneymaking on streams for VTubers are donations. YouTube’s donation system is referred to as “super chats” and its monthly subscription system is called “memberships”\footnote{For clarity, the equivalency of a Twitch follow on YouTube is called subscribing and a Twitch subscription on YouTube is called a membership. There is no in house currency on YouTube like there is on Twitch.}. Super chats have different colors based on their amount, and the brightly colored super chats light up the chat box and then remain for a limited amount of time at the top of the chat box, indicating their donation amount with their color ranging from cool blues, greens, oranges, pinks, and finally red super chats. Red super chats are any amount over 100 USD, and super chats are capped at 500 USD. The donate button also glows and pulses different colors when there are several donations at once, encouraging the viewer to participate in the social act of giving the streamer money. This takes the social element of subscribing and following streamers to the next level: by participating in mass gift giving to a streamer, they not only feel a connection to that streamer, but also to the other members of the audience (Sjöbolm and Hamari 992).

There is a different kind of acknowledgement of money on VTubers streams vs. IRL streamer’s videos. Instead of the focus on the streamer/audience connection seen in the on-screen
reader in Pokimane’s streams, where donations and the text-to-speech feature create dialogue between her and the audience, donations on VTuber streams may happen quickly and with little or no acknowledgement. Very often only Twitch based VTubers utilize text to speech readers, which means that the majority of VTubers – the ones who stream on YouTube – do not. Although often the games played are much more casual and slower paced, are meant to be single player only, or can easily be paused during gameplay, VTubers will still often leave donation reading for later in the stream. Very often VTubers will dedicate the end of their streams to super chat reading, either scrolling through previous chat, or reading super chats as they appear during that segment. The time is spent acknowledging individuals who donated as well as answering individual questions asked in the super chats. While there is no emphasis on timeliness of reading the donations, there is much more emphasis on the importance of the money for the streamer; often VTubers will profusely thank donators and express great emotion at larger donation amounts. The audience in VTuber streams are not deindividualized in the same way as on Pokimane’s stream, and fans who donate money are prioritized and individualized in that moment on stream and personally thanked by the VTuber. Enthusiasm for a specific super chat is generally gauged dependent on the amount of money given by that user.

Twitch donations for Pokimane are a secondary element of her streams and she has purposely limited them because of her discomfort and her stated non-reliance on them. She controls her interactions with the chat by purposefully anonymizing them, limiting the amount of money she receives, and by utilizing the text-to-speech reader instead of reading them out loud

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14 The exception, of course, is red super chats, which will be noticed and thanked often immediately, but often without reading the donation note.
15 Zentreya, a VShojo talent who streams on Twitch, utilizes speech-to-text-to-speech, which replaces her voice with a female text to speech voice, and also uses a male coded text-to-speech for donations.
and saying the name of the donator. Pokimane controls her position as the streamer and denies monetary reliance on her audience. She also benefits from a large number of brand deals which greatly account for the amount of profit that she makes on stream. For VTubers, however, brand deals are not common and any collaborations with companies are made through management. More often, companies are releasing their own VTubers instead of partnering with well-known and established VTubers, such as Netflix (I’m N-Ko!). Super chats, therefore, are received and perceived as being much more of an indicator of the individual’s success. The more donations, the more popular and the better off a VTuber is, something that VTubers often emphasize about themselves (Aki Rosenthal confesses 0:45).

In addition to donations, streamers on YouTube may encourage their fans to become members of their channel. Monthly memberships provide special advantages over what is considered default watching capabilities in YouTube. The differences in terms “subscriber” and “member” create an interesting context for the relationship between the viewer and the streamer. On Twitch, the viewer pays for the ability to watch the stream unhindered and without ads, and any other benefit comes as an extra and is dependent on the amount of time and money the streamer has made on the platform. For YouTube, a member pays to be a part of an exclusive group that gets extra content and special abilities to communicate with the streamer. Member’s only chat is equivalent to subscriber only chat on Twitch, and YouTube also provides the ability to have membership content that is exclusive to members and may never be shown to regular viewers of the channel. The only requirement for a YouTube channel to have a membership is that they have had at least 4,000 individual views in the last 12 months, a minimum of 1,000

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16 i.e., They are approved through management and management takes a percentage of the profit before paying the VTuber.
subscribers to their channel and are above the age of 18 (YouTube Partnership Program). The focus becomes more on the creator of the content than on the content itself, and the streamer is able to reward viewers who have money and privilege. The exclusivity of member only streams take subscriber only chats to the next proverbial level and closes off content completely instead of just blocking chat modes.

The actual financial success of the VTubers depends greatly on the contracts, allowances afforded to them by the management teams that own their characters, the amount of money a streaming platform takes and the tax rates in the country that they live in (KIRYU COCO FIRST SALARY 1:05). This can end up in a serious disparity between amount of money made and actual amount of money received, especially for Japanese VTubers, who are subject to the flat 20% income tax rate and YouTube’s 30% fee, and while management fees are not disclosed, VTubers do not make even half of what they earn on stream (How much do VTubers earn? 10:12). Kiryu Coco, a HoloLive talent, is a dragon woman with horns and a large purple tail and is one of the most popular VTubers and is one of the largest earners of money made from super-chats on the YouTube website, not just of VTubers. Although information on how much VTubers actually make compared to their live donations after the percentages that YouTube and the VTuber management companies take, as well as taxes paid on the amount of money earned are not fully transparent, the amount of money that she and other VTubers receive from these super chats and donations can be considerably less than if they weren’t with the management teams.

The Unimportance of Gender
Because gender is the instigating factor in Pokimane’s harassment, understanding the audience perception of VTuber gender and identity needs to preface a discussion of VTuber harassment. To show why VTubers experience and deal with harassment differently than Pokimane I will demonstrate the way that the audience perceives the gender of VTubers. Many of the most popular VTubers are female and whether or not the streamers themselves are female is not easily determined due to the possibility of the usage of voice modulators in a stream. IRL streamers are different from VTubers not just because of the technological systems that go into play when creating a stream, but also when it comes to the audience understanding and participation in the livestreams. Female hypervisibility is subverted in VTubers because the real-life streamers have hidden identities.

Any look into the streamer’s individual life is done through the VTuber’s streams. Any divulgement of personal information becomes more of a spur of the moment decision rather than a carefully cultivated decision. Often VTubers will answer questions sent to them on stream and may use personal experience outside of their VTuber careers as examples for answering. In one stream, a Japanese VTuber named Usada Pekora answered a question on whether or not her family approved of her choice in career, and she answered that her family did not even know that she was a VTuber, instead thinking that she was simply unemployed and enjoyed doing nothing but playing video games all day ("Mama, I'm a Vtuber"). The video then became part of a series in which she set a goal of “revealing her identity” to her mother, whom she lives with, once she had reached a certain number of subscribers to her YouTube channel. While her real-life identity remains a secret, as well as that of her family members, the narrative of her daily life became a part of the narrative of her virtual life. She now has her mother on as a guest for drinking streams, where they drink a branded Sake that she released in conjunction with a Sake company.
To emphasize the element of secrecy and the importance of maintaining a distinct separation between the character and the streamer’s real life, the only information listed in the FAQ section of the HoloLive website is information on how to create fan art of the streamer and a very detailed list of what is and is not acceptable to send to the VTubers via mail. It ignores any kind of inquiry that does not directly involve gifting material items to VTubers (FAQ). There is a focus on maintaining an illusion that the VTubers are completely disconnected from their real-life counterparts, and one of the elements of HoloLive’s contracts are strict silence and secrecy of the entertainer’s identity, and a breach of contract will result in forced retirement from the company. There is no information on the identities, the programs used, any kind of personal information or technical information that may shatter the illusion of the VTuber as anything more than what appears in the videos and streams is non-existent.

The question of female competency in video games is also subverted when the possibility of a secret or hidden gender of the real-life streamer is always present. This is common in multiplayer video games as well, and as common as gender switching is in the online video game playing community, it is an accepted fact that the gender of the player character is not dependent on the gender of the real-life player (Martey, 289). The reality for many players is that more often than not their in-game gender is not indicative of their real-life gender. With the de-focus on the gender of the performer vs. the gender of the character, the expectations of the audience for VTubers are completely different from the expectations for IRL streamers. Unfortunately, the issue with IRL streamers often becomes one of perceived undeserving of an audience based around the idea of whether or not they have the skill in whatever game they are playing, because

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17 Two former HoloLive entertainers, Mano Aloe and Hitomi Chris, were forced to retire due to harassment in the beginning of their careers that resulted in the harassers releasing the VTuber’s real identities.
female players are perceived as having innately lower skills than male streamers (Paasen 426). This idea of mastery is also conveyed by accusations that female IRL streamers are reliant on teammates in order to succeed, despite the fact that this has been disproven (Shen 322) and is much more common in multiplayer games. This accusation works to reinforce the idea that female IRL streamers are only streaming to show off their bodies for male entertainment as “camwhores” (Kotaku), because once again, there’s no possibility of the player just being good when they are female. While Pokimane shifts focus from her body back to the stream and to her video games, she is still continually accused of manipulating men and being a bad gamer.

The possibility of VTubers having a hidden male gender becomes an issue that is resolved by audiences either in denial or dismissal. Denial is often represented as the prevailing rumor of the “illegitimacy” of the gender of VTubers being the same as the gender of their performers is constantly brought up as a detractor for outsiders of the community. The mimicry of male behaviors and the awareness and acceptability of sexualization is a common piece of evidence given of the possibility of male performers, as gender switching players will mimic and perpetuate stereotypical gendered behaviors (Martey, 294) and in fact it is common in the larger media creation community to create female characters that are simply reappropriated males (Euteneuer, 116). For instance, Nora Cat is a VTuber who independently streams on YouTube without a management affiliation. The character debuted in 2017 and gained some popularity before an incident on stream that caused notoriety. While livestreaming is an easy and immediate way of connecting with an audience, there are also possibilities for technical difficulties that result in errors in the stream or failures of the programs that facilitate VTuber performance. The character of Nora Cat is female, and the audience treats her as such, despite the revelation on a February 2018 stream that showed Nora Cat’s performer, whose name is not available, is an
adult male streamer (Bevan). The performer streams solely through his performance of Nora Cat, using face capture technology and a voice modulator in order to change his own voice to better match audience expectations of a female-coded voice. While Nora Cat did lose some subscribers and hasn’t seen the growth that some other VTubers may benefit from, she does still have a dedicated streaming schedule and has grown her audience of 56,000 at the time of the face reveal video to over 80,000 subscribers currently on YouTube. Many fan-edited and created websites that give information about VTubers note that Nora Cat’s streamer is male but that this fact does not change that Nora Cat is a female (Nora Cat). The gender of what is seen, the performance itself, is more important than the reality, because the audience doesn’t care about the identity of the performer, only of the character.

The entertainment factor of a video game stream disconnects with mastery and in the process makes the streamer more relatable and perhaps less focused on the game itself and more on the audience. This may also explain the popularity of the “Just Chatting” topic channel on Twitch, where the interactivity of the streamer with the audience becomes the focus of the stream. In less focused streams streamers may be able to take direction from the audience and would be more likely to engage in behavior that may not actually progress them through the games that they are playing. Again, this decreases the focus of mastery and increases the focus of entertainment and interactivity. The narrative of the stream, being a live event, centers more on the audience’s relationship with the streamer than the streamer’s relationship with the game. Through performance and entertainment, the focus of the video games changes for the viewer and the streamer, and the interactivity changes the function of the video game and the stream itself. The streamer becomes a part of the game as a homogenous unit for the audience to interact with instead of a showcase of ability of the streamer in the game. That is also a reason why
Pokimane and other female IRL streamers have a hard time maintaining focus on their skills and abilities while VTubers often stream random content and more single-player or relaxed gameplay, which are more associated with male views of female gameplay (Paaßen 425). The focus of VTubers is on their feminine qualities and their potential as entertainment for a majority male audience. VTubers become the thing that the video game community accuses female IRL streamers of being, entertainment that exists to get money from the audience by using feminine stereotypes.

Privilege of Cute

Often VTubers behavior is based off of disruption and subversion of “seiso” or wholesome culture (This is SEISO!), which focuses on purity and cuteness\(^\text{18}\). The evolution of the magical girl character, which many VTubers can find their visual basis in, shifted towards focusing male-gaze and male audiences as a marketing tool. It turned what was originally in the 1960s a child-based entertainment into specifically media for the enjoyment of adults while also maintaining its child-friendly appearance (Saito 153). Cuteness is also a labor mode in Japanese media and many different media where cuteness is valued, such as net idols, vocaloids and VTubers, cuteness is a mode that allows viewers and audience members to relax and rest at the expense of female labor (Lukacs 496). Gendered performance in video games is, to some extent, reflective of gendered ideas of female nurturing and caring, where ideas that female gamers only play social games may actually be confusion over the differences between experience levels

\(^{18}\) In 2020 Nyanners released a parody music video of Doja Cat’s “Say So” titled “Seiso” which featured lyrics such as “Though I am just a gremlin; Not cute as you imagined; I’m trying to be wholesome; Wanna be seiso” (SEISO 2:53).
This confusion is combined with the backlash that many women experience in exposing their gender in video games (Paaßen 428), the objectification of femininity in video games (Burnay 216) and the tendency of video game developers simply taking male characters and changing their appearances and voice actors to be female (Euteneuer 117). If we take these, as well as my example of the explicit ambiguity of the performer’s gender in VTubers, we can see that VTubers act in a way that combines cuteness, portrayal of innocence, and stereotypical ideas of female attractiveness in a style that has been marketed to young men since the 80s while also overtly sexualizing themselves, acting violently, participating in activities that are often seen as male-centric, such as video games, and constantly working to appease the audience by emphasizing harassment as an outsider force in a community where the assumption is that no one in the audience is actually female. Thus, VTubers, animated women, played by women, entertain men with a performance of what men want women to be, while also showing their proficiency in video games without the backlash of cries of perceived trespassing, because the characters are removed enough from reality, the gender of the performer is ambiguous enough, and the entertainer never disrupts the audience’s expectations of them – in direct contrast to IRL female streamers, especially Pokimane.

Playing into the expectations of the audience by embodying the physical tropes of cuteness or more specifically the “cute” stereotype and the desires of the perceived audience – one that is thought to be majority male – is much more common than VTubers who act more “realistically” like Pokimane. While Pokimane is still an entertainer who is performing for a crowd, the performance of gender and the identity that is shown on her streams is a more realistic look at the actual behavior of a woman than those portrayed by VTubers. Of course, there don’t appear to be any illusions that people think that VTubers are real characters, and it’s established
and understood by the average viewer that this is a performance. This removal of the real-life identity of the VTuber from their on-screen avatar gives VTubers a similar privilege that Ninja and other male IRL streamers have. The privilege of invisibility allows VTubers the advantage of perpetuating harmful and violent sexualized rhetoric that does not affect their real-life identities. Although it is not the same, as the difference in gender is not lost on the audience, there are choices that VTubers can make to remove themselves from situations that female IRL streamers do not have the ability to.

Many VTubers complain about negative audience reactions in their streams which parallels some behaviors that real life streamers, such as Pokimane, experience. The difference between the confrontation of behavior in the real-life streamer’s and the VTuber’s streams appears to be the effect that the performer wants to have on the audience. Pokimane’s attack of the behavior that she sees in her chat directly engages with and denounces that behavior, she also refers to her chat directly as the source of the violence, notes usernames and attributes gender identity and age to the delinquents. This is because in order to effectively maintain control of her streaming space she has to employ these moderation methods (London 66). VTubers, on the other hand, center the discussion on their personal feelings about the violence and the misconduct. They don’t directly attribute the messages to their fans, and place blame on misunderstandings and people who are outside of the community. This is so common that these harassers have a name: “antis”. The deflection also works to empower the VTubers, since the harassment is outsider behavior it doesn’t focus the streamer and allows the VTuber to reinforce the relationship with the community. The normalization of some behaviors, which center the physicality of the animated figure, such as sexualization, and the use of rhetoric that focuses othering in reference to harassment behaviors that are not focused on sexualizations shows the
utilization of VTuber identity to protect the performer from harassment. Considering the use of harassment as a way of disciplining women in public spaces (Cole 357), VTuber communities then encourage calling out bad behavior in defense of the streamer (London 63) and thereby deflect that kind of gendered harassment.

In one stream, a HoloLive talent named Shirogane Noel talked about being unable to play a game because of negative comments from viewers. As the chat filled with responses saying “I’m sorry” she quickly attributed the behavior to people who weren’t normal viewers of her stream (Noel was hurt 1:36). The audience is not the problem, the problem is people who don’t understand VTubers, and this is reflected in the comments sections of the videos. On Twitch the chat can be replayed back, but chat serves as a separate function to the saved video, and when uploaded to a video streaming site (such as YouTube) the chat may be lost. On YouTube, on the other hand, comments may be saved as a part of the original stream, or the stream may be reuploaded with the option for a separate comments section that exists outside of the live chat function. Uploaded comments to saved livestream often comment on specific moments and the chat behaviors in that moment. The video referenced was reuploaded by a viewer who added English subtitles, and many of the comments mention feeling anger at the way that Noel was treated: “Man danchou¹⁹ doesn’t deserve the mean comments”, “Can we just enjoy her play the game, you dont need to say hurtful things, thats not hard people”, and one commenter gave an impassioned plea to other viewers which included “People can be complete idiots sometimes. These girls aren't pro gamers ya know... They play games for fun and to entertain us. The LEAST people can do is be supportive and not overly critical when they struggle.” The shifting

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¹⁹ Many HoloLive talents have nicknames given to them by their communities. Noel’s is “Danchou” which translates to “captain” or “leader”.

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of responsibility from the audience to some shadow commenter that exists outside of the viewing audience, and comments underneath the video reinforcing that idea influence later viewers to attribute negative behaviors to outsiders. This behavior is also a form of benevolent sexism, reinforcing the idea that male audience members need to “rescue” female VTubers (Tang and Fox 518). Instead of forcing the audience members to analyze internalized behaviors and recognizing patterns inside their own community, the offenders become “others” and the blame is able to be shifted away from anyone who may be watching the streams.

Another benefit for VTubers is the difference in games played and overall focuses of the streams between VTubers and IRL streamers. IRL streamers often participate in competitive game play and tournaments, while VTuber’s common choice of cooperative and group-based party games, as well as single player games which can be paused frequently during gameplay reinforce an idea of the more stereotypically relaxed and casual gameplay habits of female players. We can see that the expectations are different for IRL streamers and VTubers, and that often these expectations are based on how the individual streamers look. When IRL streamers try to shift into streaming set ups that de-prioritize their appearance, they receive backlash for it. With a lot of the assumptions being made around IRL female streamers manipulating audiences and purposefully sexualizing themselves in order to gain money (Cata 141), there is an advantage for VTubers. VTubers are able to maintain the prioritization of their appearance as something that serves to appeal to the audience while minimizing the amount of work they have to do to their actual bodies. The effect also increases victim blaming, as VTubers become “models” for female behaviors online. They are doing it in ways that are considered acceptable, and when IRL females stray from that model, or fight against it, the backlash is centered on women’s inability to “deal” with normal behaviors of men online. They can both normalize
sexualization, participate in sexualization of others, and remove their own physicality from that sexualization. The beliefs and ideas among the community of the acceptance of female sexualization, and their status as objects to be consumed is perpetuated by the behaviors that the VTubers themselves exhibit. If behaviors of sexualization are deemed as acceptable in video games, and it is acceptable because female entertainers are participating in it, it continues to emphasize misogynistic ideas of female inferiority.

While the animated avatar may allow the female performers to forgo the pressure of visibility that female gamers and streamers are put under for not conforming to the communities, they continue to perpetuate those ideas. The behaviors that VTubers exhibit directly reinforce the behaviors that Pokimane actively tries to hinder and dissuade on her streams.

This is the way that VTubers subvert gender expectations, on the one hand they provide the emotional labor that online women are expected to give to a male audience, cajoling and appreciating them, never blaming their audiences for harassment, and continually appreciating donations and gifts not as payment for the entertainment service they provide, but as gifts given by members of a community that they care for deeply. On the other hand, they sexualize their avatars, behave in ways that directly contradict prescribed female gender norms, scream, curse and act violently in video games and 3D streams. They behave competitively and will beat each other up, in video games and the real world. This is obvious in the streams of Nyatasha Nyanners, a VShojo talent who started as an indie performer. Nyatasha Nyanners is an American VTuber who streams on Twitch and works with the management company VShojo. She primarily speaks English, and streams for a primary English-speaking audience, although she can speak at least Japanese and Russian as well. For April Fool’s 2021 she performed a stream in which she had gained large breasts, and then responded to audience recognition of her breasts
with feigned ignorance (Nyanners gets BIG new features!). Although Nyanners streams on Twitch, she maintains YouTube channels similar to Pokimane’s, but she uploads much more frequently to YouTube than Pokimane, utilizing VTuber presence on YouTube as a way of enhancing her own popularity on the website. On her main YouTube channel, she posts edited and curated clips from her longer Twitch streams and they almost always include overly suggestive language and thumbnails that include emojis and stills of Nyanners’ character making sexualized faces. She often makes sexualized jokes in her streams, to the point that anytime something sexual is shown on stream she comments on it or highlights it, although her reaction to it in games or on media that she is playing may vary between discomfort as awkwardness or laughing at it. The sexualization is a display of misogynistic ideas of how women should be treated – which is very much the opposite of how we’ve seen Pokimane react to it. Nyanners utilizes sexualization of her character to entice her audience into watching her content.

Kiryu Coco often portrays herself as an antagonist against the management team she is contracted with and presents her financial relationship with the company as extortion by gangsters which adds an interesting relationship between the VTuber, their audience and the management companies. Audience members support VTubers through memberships and donations, which is then split up amongst companies that are portrayed as manipulative before a considerably smaller amount is given to the VTuber. Because there is no other way to support the VTubers, and the only way to communicate with them is often through donating large sums of money, the audience is incentivized to give more and more money to the VTubers in order to not only support them financially, but to also create personalized interactions with them. This can set a precedent for the accusation that streamers, especially female ones, are only after the money of their fans, and are willing to please the audience in any way, an accusation that has
come up time and time again (Cata 141). This is also a way for harassers to continually disrupt chat and gameplay, as on occasion particularly determined audience members will buy memberships in order to bypass member’s only chat restrictions. Harassment on member’s only streams creates revenue for the streamer that is then partially taken by a management company that hires and pays for the moderators responsible for removing the users who harass. VTubers are paid to endure and remove their own harassment.

Part of Kiryu Coco’s notoriety was a news show she used to stream daily called “AsaCoco”, where she would greet the audience with “Good Morning Motherfuckers” and featured many collaborative shorts where she would play jokes recorded by other HoloLive VTubers. She would stream the show daily during the week at 6 am JPT for people who were getting ready to go to work, providing them with a form of entertainment that was based off of not only her overly sexualized appearance with large breasts in a low-cut shirt, but also her emotional labor, by utilizing a form of feminine identity that is recognized as existing for the reassurance and entertainment of men. A running joke on Kiryu Coco’s streams and originating from her AsaCoco show is her drug “AsaCoco”, which comes in a variety of forms, such as needles, gas tanks, drinks and most infamously, her AsaCoco buttplugs. The buttplugs are fashioned to look exactly like her tail, and often the implication is that her tail is not actually a biological tail, but instead one of her AsaCoco buttplugs. Because the AsaCoco show was streamed early in the morning, there were many Japanese and foreign fans who were unable to watch the stream, and the AsaCoco drug was meant to be a fake product that audience members could consume in order to get their daily dose of AsaCoco. Of the products, the buttplug is the most enduring, and is brought up very often. In her weekly Sunday Afternoon “Meme Review” streams her mouse on stream is her AsaCoco buttplug, and often fans will reference it when she
showcases audience submitted memes and jokes. It is a clear way for Coco to introduce sexualization into her streams, make it into a joke and also have complete power over it, while simultaneously letting the audience “in on the joke”, allowing them permission to speak about, laugh at, and sexualize her and other VTubers.

Because harassment of VTubers is perceived as not done by their communities and we’ve established that VTubers are not a part of reality, and that their privilege often reflects this, it is interesting to note how they are still vulnerable to certain real-world considerations. HoloLive has multiple international subdivisions, its headquarters in Japan and its branches in America, Indonesia and its former Chinese branch. Two HoloLive talents, Kiryu Coco and Akai Haato, both participated in streams in the September of 2020 where they displayed YouTube demographic information, noting the percentages of their viewers from different countries (Coco and Haato). One of the countries that they acknowledged and thanked on stream was Taiwan: a country whose independence is not currently recognized by the country of China. Even something as simple as acknowledging that people who are watching you on stream are from a specific country can be an act of real-world political intrigue (Morrissy). After a press release from the company that owns HoloLive, Cover, expressing its support for China’s sovereignty, Akai Haato and Kiryu Coco both posted public apologies and were put on a three-week temporary hiatus, the Chinese branch of HoloLive was shut down, and many so-called antis.

20 It is a joke that Ina, the HoloLive EN talent with tentacles, is an avid user of the AsaCoco buttplug. For reference of the commonplace usage and the longevity of the AsaCoco joke, the AsaCoco buttplug first appeared on 13 January 2020 (Asacoco LIVE News! 11:25) and the joke mentioned was made in a stream on 12 June 2021 (REDDIT 45:12).

21 There are, of course, a vast number of political considerations that must be acknowledged when speaking about the Chinese government’s “One-China” policy, ones that cannot be properly and fully represented in the short amount of time that I have here.

22 While “antis” appears to be a word that started out meaning any person who is against something, it has become synonymous with Pro-Chinese commenters who harass Japanese VTubers for their connection with Kiryu Coco.
started attacking Kiryu Coco and anyone who collaborates with her, and many HoloLive talents have been blocked from collaborating with her at all (Kiara expresses). Kiryu Coco has since announced her retirement with HoloLive and the ending of the character’s streaming career. Although the harassment appears to have influenced the move towards retirement of the career, the actual streamer who performs Kiryu Coco will presumably be able to continue streaming in other forms, completely removed from the harassment of antis and other harassment. However, if she streams using her IRL face she may end up being victim to the same kinds of harassment that Pokimane faces.

**Conclusion**

VTubers are not completely removed from our reality, the lives and livelihoods of their performers are affected by actions that happen on and off stream. Despite the privileges of their streaming appearances and the fan relationships that they cultivate, they are still vulnerable to the real world that they try to remove themselves from. The behaviors that they exhibit, embody, and represent are entrenched in the social and cultural frameworks that they are experienced in, and these behaviors harm other streamers who are not able to afford the protections that Pokimane can, or are unable to achieve the success that is afforded to VTubers who can sign with management companies or afford expensive model designs.
Conclusion

An original inspiration for this paper came about as a part of my identity as a female video game player. I have been enjoying Twitch passively for years, and I had seen and heard of VTubers from friends and from my YouTube suggested videos. When I found out about the incident where two VTubers mention Taiwan live on stream and the political fallout that followed, I wondered exactly what role video game streaming plays in media. Beginning to investigate Twitch streamers I noticed a lack of female representation, and once I started looking up information on those few female streamers, I started to see patterns of behavior from the community that I recognized from my own experiences in video games. Looking more and more into VTubers and other streamers and controversies I started to notice similarities and interesting elements of the medium that aren’t present in other media and yet still hold onto tropes and discriminatory patterns present in contemporary culture.

While anecdotal, and perhaps coincidental, using my own experience as a lens to view the medium of video game streaming and how gender is represented within it became an interesting and enlightening process that shows the importance of individual experience as an entry point into research. The individual experience of video games, and by extension video game streaming, varies widely, and although individuals are often highlighted with in video game communities, often the individual is forgotten in the sea of the community, hidden behind a text-to-speech donation, generalized, and gendered to look and behave in specific ways that are normalized and expected. Through this analysis we see the difficulties and problems that video game streamers experience and the differences in agency that are afforded based on gender and
privilege. We have also seen how VTubers experience the same types of harassment, but frame it differently, which helps them and but can contribute to continued harassment of IRL streamers.

Unfortunately, there are issues and further studying that I was unable to include in the final product of this thesis. I failed to fully describe the relationship of the tropes of anime girl image and Asian pop singer idols with the VTuber conception, as it is an extremely complex history that would require an entirely separate thesis to properly frame. The purpose of VTuber analysis in this thesis is to show them from the perspective of a member of the video game streaming community and how basic overlaps of Asian electronic media and the video game community create an interesting counter to the IRL streamers whose appearance has to follow equally strict rules of gender presentation. My hope is that in the future I or another researcher can examine the creation of VTuber culture from its historical and cultural background. This thesis fails in that it is framing them from a very specific cultural viewpoint, one of a western, English speaking video game streaming audience.

There is also a failure in that the thesis does not take a proper look at the political intricacies of China and Japan’s relationship. Because of cross-cultural and linguistic miscommunications and concerns, some of the issues of the mentioning of Taiwan appear to confuse and anger English speaking audiences. The purpose of its mention in the text was to showcase that VTubers are not above real-world political issues, money is a very serious concern for VTubers, and appealing to an audience to ensure continued revenue extends beyond sexualization of a female avatar. Indeed, controversies of video game streamers and the rhetoric of the public apology is a fascinating study that exists outside the scope of this thesis.
Another continuation of this study that I wish to be able to perform in the future is the addition of analysis of the impact of race on video game streamers. There are racist ideas of exclusion and inferiority in the IRL streaming community and invisibility and complete exclusion in the VTuber community. To fully understand gender issues, issues of race must be included, and a deeper look into those problems is warranted as a continuation of this research.

All in all, there is undeniably much more to analyze not only in terms of VTubers but also in video game streaming as a whole. As media continues to center on online experiences and interactions, video game streaming will not only continue to grow its fanbase but will also grow its recognizability as an avenue for consumerism and advertising. The social issues of society permeate all forms of modern media.

An issue with analyzing audience behavior is that it does not in fact represent the totality of viewers and members of the community. It does, however, represent trends in the community that focus violence and discrimination towards female and BIPOC members. Another unfortunate problem with focusing studying Pokimane as the focal point for my first chapter is that it centers a white presenting woman in a community where white people dominate visibility. While Pokimane was chosen because of her gender and popularity, it is indicative of the underlying racial issues in the community that the most popular woman on Twitch has light skin. The issue that I want to highlight is the gendered violence that she encounters, but one of the many aspects of her fight against harassment is her agency, something afforded to her by her privilege. VTubers are also often portrayed as light-skinned and Japanese in origin, even when played by non-Japanese entertainers, and have stylized body forms which represent cultural ideas of feminine ideals. Issues of prioritizing whiteness and model minority behaviors are not lost on the researcher. Gendered violence is not only rooted in the male/female binary, but in
colonialism and racism, and it is important that this conversation repeats and reinforces that (Mack 349).

While the VTubers of HoloLive and other companies and Pokimane are not monoliths of female streamers, they do provide insight into the challenges and issues that are a result of the limitations and barriers set in places for female streamers by the video game community. Male members of the community continue to see themselves as the majority, and sexualized violence and behaviors continue to be accepted behaviors because of social ideas of female inferiority. While the protections that Pokimane is afforded are not available to all female streamers, and while the behaviors of VTubers reinforce sexualizations and stereotypes by analyzing and understanding the reasons why these methods are utilized we can better understand possible paths of resistance and recognize negative behaviors and their root causes.
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