Article

Bodies, Brands, and Bullies: Culture Jamming and the Livestreaming of Engagement

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Abstract

This article uses a case study of an anti-brand protest that was livestreamed on Twitch to develop a media and cultural studies framework for conceptualizing livestreaming platforms as mechanisms that extract engagement and discoverability value from cultural noise. It begins with a review of several fields of literature: branding, media activism, and culture jamming; livestreaming and affective labor; and social media platforms, affective economies, and noise. Then, it synthesizes this literature into a conceptualization of livestreaming's cultural product and form, connecting its product to the extraction of engagement metrics from affective economies and its form to the affective labor that livestreamers are performing for the purposes of developing personal brands. Finally, it connects the record-setting viewership numbers the *Hogwarts Legacy* protest created for Twitch to an affective economy of joy, sadness, anger, and nostalgia, focusing specifically on how this economy became a driver of engagement and discoverability value for a transmedia brand.

Keywords

livestreaming, engagement, branding, activism, influencers

Introduction

On Monday, February 6, 2023, a collective of activists, upset over J.K. Rowling's embrace of trans-exclusionary ideologies, flocked to the livestreaming platform Twitch to express their opposition to the promotion of *Hogwarts Legacy* (Warner Bros. Games, 2023): a 3D open-world action role-playing game set in the Wizarding World of Harry Potter. For the next 48 hr, channels featuring the game provided a staging ground for an explosion of political activity, featuring protestors clashing with anti-protestors in frenetically scrolling chats with livestreamers (and their moderators) reacting disparagingly. This activity, which attracted a large number of voyeurs interested in the drama of the spectacle, was record setting for a single-player game streamed on Twitch (Punt, 2023), drawing over a million concurrent viewers per hour to the game (SullyGnome —Twitch stats and analysis, 2023). In the days that followed, *Hogwarts Legacy* would remain at the top of the Twitch Charts, selling more than 12 million units in its first 2 weeks, with executives from Warner Bros. Discovery attributing the game's success to a level of player engagement that was nothing short of "spectacular" (Ivan, 2023).

By bringing research on livestreaming and affective labor (Cullen, 2022; Ruberg, 2021; Tran, 2022; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019) into conversation with research on branding

(Arvidsson, 2006; Klein, 2000), culture jamming (Dery, 1993), noise (Parikka, 2011), and engagement (Evans, 2020), this article uses a case study of the activism surrounding the *Hogwarts Legacy* launch to provide a media and cultural studies framework for conceptualizing the cultural form of livestreaming as being contingent on the use of synchronous chat interfaces as mechanisms for intercepting and converting cultural noise, or noise politics, into metrics of engagement. With this in mind, we will also be contributing to an emerging body of platform governance research on the negotiation of power relationships between platforms, users, and legacy media corporate actors by insisting that it is through this process of extracting engagement metrics from affective economies that livestreaming platforms create information capital (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012) for investors and discoverability (McKelvey & Hunt, 2019) value for transmedia franchises.

This article begins by outlining the theories and methods being used. Then, it uses a media and cultural studies

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framework to connect the record-setting single-game viewership numbers, the boycott created for Twitch to the affective labor of livestreaming in general and an affective economy of joy, sadness, pain, and nostalgia in particular, focusing specifically on broadcasting footage, media coverage, and social media posts taken from livestreaming channels run by Zepla (2023), Girlfriend Reviews (2023), and SilverVale (2023). In other words, this article is not interested in arguing over the ethics of revolutionary tactics being used by activists as much as it is interested in the mechanisms that platforms (and corporations) are using to amplify, filter, and extract value from the noise generated by these arguments.

Culture Jamming: A Brief History

What happens when a culture jamming media activist strategy is implemented on a livestreaming platform? Before answering this question, it is useful to begin with a brief introduction to research on culture jamming. Culture jamming is a term that describes anti-consumerist resistance strategies (DeLaure & Fink, 2017) used to counter advertising and marketing messages through a variety of means, ranging from pranks and parodies to the vandalism of billboards. The term, which is attributed to collage artist Don Joyce and his experimental band Negativeland (Dery, 1993), can be interpreted as an extension of the practice of radio jamming, which was a tactic used to disrupt broadcast frequencies by decreasing the signal-to-noise ratio (Carducci, 2006). In the context of game culture, culture jamming has been applied to Jacques Servin's SimCopter hack, which inserted crowds of kissing men into a military-themed helicopter simulation (Ouellette, 2013), and the culture jamming/subtervising work by Molleindustria (Paolo Pedercini), which includes *The McDonald's Videogame* (Stoyanova, 2017).

Culture jamming's relationship with ethical consumerism, civil disobedience, and resistance is complex and nuanced, with Dery (1993) insisting that the phenomenon is best understood as an "elastic category" which "accommodates a multitude of subcultural practices" (para. 36). This multitude used to be defined, in the case of pre-digital culture jamming, against mass media in general and corporate branding in particular, with the appropriation of billboard, television, and magazine advertising campaigns cited as key examples of the practice (Klein, 2000). But in the case of the *Hogwarts Legacy* launch there was an added layer of the platform and the macro-influencer/livestreamer, with the macro-influencer/livestreamer acting as an intermediary between the multitude and the corporation by way of a platform. Implicit in this shift is the fact that platforms are not only businesses models, software applications (Gorwa, 2018), and data infrastructures (Poell et al., 2021), but also political actors (Gillespie, 2018) that are having a significant but poorly understood effect on industries, democracies, and cultures.

While the growing interdisciplinary field of platform studies is beginning to bridge gaps in knowledge, critical analysis of the similarities platforms share with legacy media corporate actors is an under-investigated area of scholarship (Gorwa, 2019). The events surrounding the *Hogwarts Legacy* launch provide a novel case study that can help fill this gap, for several reasons. First, *Hogwarts Legacy* is an extension of a franchise that is implementing a transmedia worldbuilding strategy, and transmedia worldbuilding strategies coincide with the rise of multi-media conglomerates interested in creating fictional universes that are recognizable as brands (Boni, 2017, p. 96). Second, the Wizarding World is currently controlled by Warner Bros. Discovery: a multi-media conglomerate, formed in response to the impact that platforms are having on film and television production, which has a licensing agreement with J.K. Rowling (Russell, 2012). Finally, Warner Bros. Discovery is one of the largest publicly traded intellectual property holders in the world, at the time of this writing, but following the merger its stock price has been performing poorly, which makes the protest surrounding the *Hogwarts Legacy* launch a novel case study.

Affective Economies of Livestreaming

Critical research on Twitch has done a good job of highlighting the affective and emotional labor that livestreaming performances demand, and the fact that most of this labor is unpaid, but this scholarship is just beginning to account for the myriad of ways in which affects associated with livestreaming circulate through other media forms. Research on affective economies can help provide this comparative focus by concentrating on the exchange and circulation of affects through media (Lehmann et al., 2019). According to Ahmed (2004), emotions (and feelings) work in "concrete and particular ways" by circulating through bodies, communities, and media in a manner similar to forms of economic capital (p. 119). Integral to this theorization is the notion that instead of residing in (and emanating from) a body, community, or sign, an emotion is a by-product of the circulation of affective intensities through bodies, communities, and signs. In other words, affects are energies and intensities whose modality is not necessarily fixed (Ahmed, 2004, p. 123), and it is the circulation and reproduction of these intensities through different modes of signification which align embodied experiences with communities and subjectivities.

Due to its emphasis on the roles that signs and emotions play in the production of identities and communities, and its compatibility with Marxist-psychoanalytic screen theory, the affective economy is a concept that is gaining popularity among scholars interested in the impact that social media platforms are having on society (Clough, 2008; Jarrett, 2016). In the context of the events of February 6, it provides a useful means of attributing the explosion of political activity that surrounded the streaming of *Hogwarts Legacy* to the rippling effects of emotions, or how "hate 'slides' sideways between figures [. . .] by reopening past associations that allow some bodies to be read as the cause of our hate, or

as being hateful" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 120). The protest was incited by a series of controversial tweets made by Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling, for example, which denied the existence of trans bodies. Meanwhile, media coverage (Cooper, 2023; Thomas, 2023; Wutz, 2023) of the event used the embodied reactions of specific livestreamers, most of whom identify as women, to insist that activists were the ones who were being hateful.

Livestreaming as a Cultural Product and Form

Missing from conservative media narratives that equate protest with bullying and harassment is a critical understanding of the mechanisms that platforms (and corporations) are using to amplify, filter, and extract value from the noise generated by the *Hogwarts Legacy* boycott. To address this gap, this article connects the events of February 6 to a critical conceptualization of the flow of livestreaming, or what can be defined as livestreaming's cultural product and form. To do so, it is useful to turn to research on Twitch that points to the role that synchronous chat windows play in mediating the formation of relationships between livestreamers and their audiences.

Synchronous chat windows are instant-messaging windows which appear beside broadcast footage that afford multiple audiovisual modes of audience communication, ranging from simple text-based greetings to ASCII art and animated gifs. These windows are colloquially referred to as "Twitch Chats," but research describes communicative atmospheres that are bursting with collective behaviors which resemble in-person crowds (Chow, 2016; Lybrand, 2019). This form of instant group communication, which is often described as a "one of the most distinctive elements" of Twitch (Johnson, 2024b, p. 12), facilitates modes of communication which resemble the conversations that internet relay chat systems support, with an important difference being the presence of a live video feed the chat can react to.

Research on livestreaming calls attention to the important roles that Twitch chats play in differentiating the platform from other forms of broadcasting, prompting Consalvo (2017) to link the aesthetics of livestreaming to a "decentering" of the game, or text, and the substitution of paratextual elements, such as the performer's persona or brand as the central source of meaning (p. 182). For audiences watching and participating on Twitch, a livestreamer's persona can be an important incentive for repeat viewing, transforming channels into branded experiences, and transforming chats into distinctively personal branded spaces. For Klein (2023, p. 53), this overlap of a person's sense of self and a carefully curated online persona is constitutive of the "age of the influencer," representing a continuous, at times paranoid, state of constant performance.

Performances on Twitch require a significant amount of affective labor, due to the immediacy of synchronous chat window aesthetics. According to Taylor (2018, p. 42), the chat is not only a resource used by livestreamers to monitor and respond to what audiences are saying, it also facilitates the emergence of mass crowd behavior, or what Harry (2012) describes as crowdspeak. Crowdspeak is a specific mode of visual communication (characterized by text, exclamations, emoticons, and memes) which is "akin to the cheering one would find in a sports stadium" (Taylor, 2018, p. 42). On a content level, crowdspeak bears a resemblance to unwanted forms of communication that have been previously classified as spam, with an important difference being its visual integration into livestream broadcasts where it provides an immediate source for real-time audience engagement alongside a broader range of viewer-to-viewer and viewer-to-streamer interactions—interactions that provide a useful means of linking and differentiating the "flow" of livestreaming from previous forms of broadcasting.

Initially introduced by Williams (1974/2004) as a means of using broadcast scheduling around advertising to distinguish the cultural form and product of television, the concept of flow, according to McKelvey and Hunt (2019), provides a useful means of critically conceptualizing "discoverability," or how platforms "actively attempt to guide how and when users discover content" (pp. 1–2). In the context of livestreaming, the events of February 6, 2023 exemplify how flow and discoverability exist in a complex and contradictory relationship with technical and cultural engagement and events occurring off the platform. The release of a highly anticipated game can drive a higher than normal amount of traffic to Twitch, for example, creating a powerful incentive for livestreamers to play new releases. Doing so can be risky, however, as interactions between livestreamers, subscribers, and new viewers are difficult to manage, resulting in clashes over etiquette, values, and politics that organizational communications theorists describe as cultural noise (Paulson, 2019).

Cultural Noise, Engagement, and Twitch

While it is still conceived as a technical problem, noise is attracting a growing amount of historical, theoretical, and practical interest for a variety of reasons, ranging from the challenges the category poses to ocular-centric media and communications histories to its complex and contradictory relationship with power and attention. According to Carmi (2020), the categorization of ostensibly unwanted communications, like noise and spam, provides a powerful means of drawing boundaries between bodies and behaviors and distinguishing human sociality from that which is non-human or anti-social. Crowdspeak, in this context, not only provides a subtle means of legitimizing forms of engagement previously dismissed as noise, but also a means of understanding how the flow of livestreaming can be conceptualized as a distinct cultural form (and product) that interfaces with the tactical use of noise.

In *Mapping Noise: Techniques and Tactics of Irregularities, Interception, and Disturbance*, Parikka (2011) connects the nonsignifying semiotics of noisy assemblages, which have long been of interest to new media artists, to the tactical use of noise in contemporary digital culture. Culture jamming is part of this history, specifically in an anti-branding context, aligning the attempt to disrupt the extension of the Wizarding World brand with a longer history of mass media activism. Livestreaming is not a form of mass media communication, however, with an important development being the presence of livestreamer/influencers encountering multiple problems with the working conditions on Twitch. The first problem is the top-down patriarchal ideologies embedded in Twitch's community guidelines (Zolides, 2021), which unfairly target the bodies, clothing, and sexuality of women (Ruberg, 2021; Ruberg et al., 2019). The second problem is the bottom-up emotional and affective labor that livestreaming (Carter & Egliston, 2021; Johnson, 2021; Taylor, 2018; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019) and content moderation require (Wohn, 2019). The third problem is the unique character of parasocial relationships on Twitch (Kowert & Daniel, 2021) which can foster communities within individual streaming channels while limiting the formation of cross-channel solidarities (Meisner, 2023). And the fourth problem is the intersection of the first three problems with neoliberal economic transitions that frame livestreaming as a novel entrepreneurial opportunity for young people disproportionately harmed by economic precarity (Guarriello, 2019; Johnson et al., 2019) without acknowledging the heightened level of risk (which includes but is not limited to harassment) that women (Tran, 2022) and livestreamers from marginalized communities face (Gray, 2017) when pursuing careers in the field.

It is within this backdrop of patriarchy, precarity, and the pursuit of microcelebrity that the *Hogwarts Legacy* launch can be framed as a novel case study that not only provides insight into the affective economies of livestreaming, but also a media and cultural studies framework for conceptualizing livestreaming synchronous chat interfaces as mechanisms for intercepting and converting communications that would have been previously classified as noise into cultural and economic forms of engagement (Evans, 2020, p. 126). Specific to this theorization is attention to the roles that different forms of engagement are playing in the development and monitoring of the Wizarding World brand, with engagement not only being an economic means of measuring audience activity and generating information capital for a corporate brand (Arvidsson, 2006) but also a cultural form of affective labor that livestreamers are tasked with performing for the purposes of developing their own personal brands. The following section will describe the methodology used to apply this theorization to a novel event where technical and cultural forms of engagement clashed, entangling a culture jamming strategy in the circulation and reproduction of affective intensities through synchronous chat interfaces and media coverage, on the one hand, and transmedia franchises and financial markets, on the other.

Methodology

Reactions to the *Hogwarts Legacy* launch were shaped by a complex assemblage of sociotechnical actors due to the uncontrolled character of protest events. Case studies are the preferred method for investigating "how" and "why" questions surrounding uncontrolled events (pp. 1–2), according to Yin (2013), enabling a holistic approach to the researching of complex phenomena by combining a variety of evidence (p. 8). Following this approach, the case study will make use of qualitative analysis of broadcast footage, social media posts, and media coverage, focusing specifically on the discourses surrounding footage taken from livestreaming channels run by Zepla (2023), Girlfriend Reviews (2023), and SilverVale (2023).

Channels run by Zepla, Girlfriend Reviews, and SilverVale were selected using the following criteria. First, all three channels were run by macro-influencers (social media personalities with over 10,000 followers) and there is a growing body of social media marketing research which insists that macro-influencers are more effective brand ambassadors when compared to celebrities, specifically due to their propensity for engaging directly with their audiences (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023; Kay et al., 2020). Second, the Zepla, Girlfriend Reviews, and SilverVale channels responded directly to the protests and clips of these responses were aggregated and reported on by various media outlets, creating a situation where footage taken from all three channels can be compared and contrasted against media coverage of the event. Finally, and most importantly, footage taken from all three channels can be analyzed qualitatively for the purposes of examining the chats and amplifying the perspectives of protest participants in them without sacrificing their anonymity.

How was footage from channels run by Zepla, Girlfriend Reviews, and SilverVale selected and coded? Media coverage of micro-influencer responses to the protest was the coding criteria used to select clips for analysis following research on affective economies (Ahmed, 2004). The Monday February 6th Girlfriend Reviews charity stream was captured and watched in its entirety, so it could be compared to a clip (taken from the stream) an audience member posted to reddit. The Zepla and SilverVale livestreams were viewed, but not in their entirety because the footage garnering media attention was purposefully edited and shared on X (formerly known as Twitter) and YouTube by each respective streamer.

Qualitative analysis of the clips selected for study was comparative with the livestream broadcast feed and Twitch chat receiving equal attention when possible. Attention to the activity taking place in the synchronous chat window was central to the analysis, as well, with the Twitch chat providing a useful means of bringing the affective economics of the

event into focus. Finally, the qualitative analysis was also grounded in data taken from SullyGnome that was used to identify the release window and a period of 48 hr during which a majority of the culture jamming activity took place—a period when the act of playing *Hogwarts Legacy* publicly generated heightened emotions for chat participants whose perspectives were missing from media coverage of the event.

Case studies are limited in their generalizability (Yin, 2013), so this article will not be making general claims about the reactions of livestreamers or the motivations of the protesters involved. A goal of this article is to use a case study of an anti-brand protest occurring on a livestreaming platform to bring media and cultural studies research on branding and resistance into conversation with interdisciplinary research on platforms and user resistance. This approach shares similarities with Light et al.'s (2018) walkthrough method, which was developed in response to the empirical challenges created by the technical closure of platforms. This article's method differs, however, by accounting for a wider array of political actors that came into contact at a specific point in time during an act of protest. Acts of protest have made for influential case studies resulting in a substantial field of literature that is beyond the scope of this article (see Neumayer & Rossi, 2016; Poell & van Dijck, 2018). Nonetheless, case studies that explore the role social media platforms play in reshaping the organization, communication, and temporality of protests (Poell, 2020) provide useful comparisons to this case.

A Record-Setting Day for Twitch

Despite taking place in a boarding school setting that J.K. Rowling developed over a series of best-selling novels chronicling the adventures of Harry Potter, *Hogwarts Legacy* is best understood as part of a broader transmedia world-building strategy designed to establish a Wizarding World brand. By the time Rowling's initial series of novels were completed, each new release was a cultural event documented and shared on social media and followed by a film adaptation. But following the completion of the Harry Potter story arch, the Wizarding World struggled to maintain its cultural relevancy in the world of cinema. To make matters worse, Rowling's social media presence has not been without controversy, with the author expressing a steady stream of trans-exclusionary views online.

When considering the backlash Rowling was receiving from fans, and the lack of audience interest in further cinematic offerings, the decision to shift the Wizarding World into a major game release was, more likely than not, made for several reasons. First, Rowling would have nothing to do with the production and promotion of the game, allowing fans of the series to discursively destabilize the original author's agency by generating their own content. This strategy recognizes the important roles that amateur and professional fans play in the collaborative transmedia worldbuilding process,

with self-described professional fans working on the game and influencer fans helping to promote it. Second, a big budget video game release could provide a valuable means of not only boosting but also measuring audience engagement and ensuring investors that entry points into the Wizarding World remained discoverable online. Both of these activities align with the "discursive" and "economic" commodity functions of transmedia engagement, according to Evans (2020, p. 148). On a discursive level, cultural capital is created individually for the fans involved in the creating and sharing of content. On an economic level, information capital is extracted by larger scale industry organizations, including Amazon and Warner Bros Discovery, who measure and filter this activity to create discoverability metrics.

According to data taken from SullyGnome, livestreamers began to preview the release of *Hogwarts Legacy* in the final week of January 2023, with views beginning to rise 12 days before the games release on February 7. There is no evidence indicating that any of the streams taking place in January were controversial, as the early access window had yet to commence, meaning that most streams were limited to discussions of the promotional material surrounding the game as opposed to demonstrations of actual gameplay. Surprise demonstrations of actual gameplay began on Monday February 6, and for some livestreamers the demonstrations did not go well.

Girlfriend Reviews is a comedy livestreaming channel that acts as an accompaniment to real-life couple Matt and Shelby's popular YouTube channel featuring quirky video game reviews presented from the perspective of a boyfriend or girlfriend tasked with deciding whether their significant other should be allowed to play the game in question. Known for a lack of engagement with feminist discourses (Yodovich & Kim, 2022) and the previous championing of LGTBQ causes, Girlfriend Reviews attempted to offset criticism of promoting a J.K. Rowling property by donating the proceeds from their February 6 preview stream of *Hogwarts Legacy* to the Trevor Project upon being granted early access to the game. This strategy did not go over well with some members of their audience, however, who used the synchronous chat to add a critical dimension to the charity stream by reminding viewers that the corporate intention behind the expansion of the Wizarding World was the continued financial investment in Rowling's intellectual property.

Footage taken from Matt and Shelby's synchronous chat channel captured a broad spectrum of views and opinions that are difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. Like artists reworking billboards for the purposes of calling attention to critiques of corporate strategies, activists redirected conversations about the game into multiple critical dialogues that volunteers tried to moderate. What is clear is that complex and nuanced debates over ownership, trans-allyship, and ethical consumerism went through a series of starts and stops—intermingling with questions and comments about the game—resulting in an overwhelming sense of absurdity

and nihilism that became disconcerting for some and humorous for others. In many respects, the comments that flooded Matt and Shelby's chat were indicative of the ideological tensions and contradictions that have a history of shaping debates over cultural jamming's relationship with branding and ethical consumption, with multiple critics calling attention to the integration of culture jamming tactics into various forms of marketing and advertising (Harold, 2004). What makes this case different, however, is the immediacy of the livestreamer/influencers by way of the platform. While marketers and advertisers are constantly seeking new relationships with fan subcultures, in the case of Twitch the platform has not only provided the infrastructure for the formation, discovery, and commercialization of new influencer/livestreamer fan subcultures, but also for the automated commercialization of clashes between these subcultures.

Following the backlash that occurred on February 6, *Hogwarts Legacy* entered into its early access period, resulting in a more organized attempt to disrupt the launch. This strategy was loosely connected and potentially aided by a website, which tracked livestreamers playing the game, that was taken down quickly when news of its existence was publicized by gaming news site Dextero (Gwilliam, 2023). In other words, the act of playing *Hogwarts Legacy* publicly became a politically charged performance during the launch window—resulting in an affective economy of joy and nostalgia, on the one hand, and anger and pain on the other.

Data on *Hogwarts Legacy*, taken from SullyGnome—Twitch stats and analysis (2023), show a rapid increase in concurrent views from 6:00 to 10:00 pm UTC on Tuesday February 7, 2023, which is when the game became available for early access purchase, with numbers reaching 1,205,383 average viewers (and 1,249,796 peak viewers) at 8 pm UTC resulting in an all-time single-player game record. The previous record (1,116,254 average views; 1,126,038 peak views) set by a single-player game was reached during the launch of *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020), which provides a noteworthy case study to reflect on, as its launch was mired by a variety of in-game bugs.

Analyzing the pre-release and post-release press coverage of *Cyberpunk 2077*, Piotr et al. (2023) describe a form of "broken promise marketing" that created a "gap between how the game" was "positively portrayed pre-release and how it finally" looked "during its premiere." This gap created a spectacle when the game premiered on Twitch causing viewers to flock to the platform to watch livestreamers reacting to a bevy of technical errors, like the absurdly comedic "t-pose" bug, which causes character models to stand up straight with their arms stretched out (in the shape of a T) on randomly occurring occasions irrespective of the events occurring in the visible environment (Murray, 2020).

Despite the different circumstances surrounding the *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Hogwarts Legacy* launches, both cases point to the heightened emotions that livestreamers (and their respective audiences) feel when they are invited to participate in the launch of a game that does not go as planned. Much has been written about these "co-creative" relations, which Banks and Humphreys (2008, p. 42) define as the agency that players and professionally employed developers share with respect to each party's ability to inflect their values onto each other. Streaming platforms, such as Twitch, exemplify an activity that is contingent on co-creative relations, but, as the releases of *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Hogwarts Legacy* demonstrate, when co-creative relations are culture jammed the heightened emotions that fans feel have the potential to slide into forms of "anti-fandom" (Click, 2019), or what Ahmed (2004) calls the "rippling effect of emotions" (p. 120).

The rippling effect of emotions surrounding the disruption of the *Hogwarts Legacy* launch was not only shaped by the reactions of livestreamers, but also reactions to reactions that spread through the platform ecosystem by way of press coverage and social media use. Of particular note was a 27-s audio clip, taken from the Girlfriend Reviews livestream, that was posted to the r/LivestreamFail subreddit. This clip begins with audio of Matt complaining about the chat, which is followed by Shelby requesting that they take a break, prompting Matt to insist that she can take a break if she wants; he will continue to demonstrate the combat system silently. Finally, there are several seconds of dead air (marking Shelby's leaving of the stream), followed by Matt saying "yall done did it now" (in a southern accent).

Twitch Chat Bullies Streamer for Playing *Hogwarts Legacy*

While there is no audiovisual evidence of Shelby crying in the clip, multiple gaming news sources cited it as evidence of bullying (Bilderbeck, 2023; Di Placido, 2023; Thomas, 2023), an interpretation which not only reinforces gender stereotypes, but also unfounded fears over the risks trans activists pose to the safety of women. Bullying, in contrast, is a label proponents of culture jamming have applied to the behavior of children, corporations, and politicians, with Klein (2000) developing the concept of "brand bullying" from the phenomenon of children being teased for wearing non-branded clothes (p. 27). This shift in discourse speaks to the significant roles that reactions from livestreamer/macro-influencers played in the circulation and reproduction of affective intensities through media coverage of the event. Among the various videos released by prominent livestreamers that commented on the boycott, notable examples that received media attention include a clip posted by Zepla, a popular livestreamer of Final Fantasy games, and a clip posted by SilverVale, a popular Vtuber who uses augmented reality technology to perform in the guise of an animated character.

In the first clip, Zepla begins by reading a negative comment she received after announcing her *Hogwarts Legacy* Stream on X (formerly known as Twitter). This commenter

insisted the Zepla they thought they had known for years had finally revealed herself to be a bigot. As Zepla was reading, there was a significant amount of criticism of the commenter in the chat, with multiple viewers criticizing their inability to understand the parasocial dynamics of livestreamer–audience relationships. A significant body of research points to the ubiquity (Leith, 2021) and uniqueness of parasocial relationships on Twitch, with Kowert and Daniel (2021) insisting that instead of being a traditional one-sided friendship that an audience member forms with an on-camera media figure (whose accessibility is limited), the potential of reciprocal interaction between a streamer and an individual is higher on Twitch, transforming what has been traditionally theorized as a one-sided relationship into a "one-and-a-half" sided relationship.

Zepla's decision to play *Hogwarts Legacy* (after discussing her reasoning for doing so with her chat) is indicative of the one-and-a-half sided nature of parasocial relationships on Twitch, and Zepla's unique position as a popular female identified Final Fantasy streamer who had recently fled the Ukraine in response to Russia's Invasion. By drawing on her audience's knowledge of this background, Zepla defended her decision to stream the game despite misgivings with its creator's political views by making several points. First, she describes her ability to separate art from the artist. Second, she mentions her anger over seeing the release of a tracking site spotlighting streamers playing the game. Finally, she compares her playing of *Hogwarts Legacy* to her continued listening to Pink Floyd despite misgivings with Roger Walters' support for the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. This response was clipped, shared, and reacted to, allowing it to spread through the platform ecosystem by way of press coverage and social media use. What did not spread was a culture jamming effort to reveal the corporate intentions behind the game's entry into the Wizarding World brand.

In a similar but slightly different vein, Vtuber SilverVale defended her decision to play the game by citing her fandom for the new trans character, a friendship with a member of the development team, and nostalgia for the comforting escape that the Wizarding World gave her when coping with childhood trauma, while also accusing the protesters of engaging in doxing, death threats, and the overall spreading of hatred. In many respects, SilverVale's video points to an affective economy of joy and nostalgia, on the one hand, and pain, sadness, and anger, on the other, that was not only driving engagement with the game, but also contributing to the labeling of protesters as sources of hatred within what should have been, from the perspective of SilverVale, a cozy gaming space. While this definition of coziness echoes concerns raised by Sullivan et al. (2023) over the constraints that the aesthetic demands of cozy games are placing on queer forms of expression, it is important to point out that the majority of the comments visible in SilverVale's livestream feeds were supportive, as SilverVale cited Twitter users as the primary source of her haters.

Following the initial press coverage, Girlfriend Reviews also released a response video that attracted the attention of journalists (Tamburro, 2023). This video included screen shots of social media activity that the couple felt was threatening and unfair, with Shelby also admitting that except a few comments banned by their moderators, the majority of the critiques raised in the chats were valid opinions and not examples of harassment. It is important to point out that footage of the synchronous chat that Shelby was reacting to contained a significant amount of comments which supported the couple and praised the hard work of their moderators. Moderators perform a significant amount of affective labor for livestreamers by acting as de facto community managers for channels that are popular enough to generate substantial chat activity. Most of this labor is invisible, but it plays an instrumental role in the development and management of livestreaming platforms in general and macro-influencer/livestreamer brands in particular.

Livestreamers are tasked with dividing their attention between the game they are playing, the commentary they are providing, and the synchronous chat that is running alongside them, as Taylor (2018, p. 95) points out. When considering the amount of affective labor involved with this process, and the precarious economic positions of livestreamers in general, the fact that negative comments often receive the most significant reactions in cases where the vast majority of viewer comments are supportive is not surprising. It is also not surprising that multiple streamers started releasing clips and reaction videos commenting on the boycott, after the Girlfriend Reviews reddit clip went viral—and that the videos that garnered the most attention focused on the reactions of cis-gendered women while ignoring the perspectives of the protesters.

In summary, the impact that the boycott had on the record-setting viewership of the game is far from clear. What is clear is that there was an affective economy entangled in the boycott that was a driver of engagement—and this economy included but was not limited to protestors clashing with livestreamers, viewers, and anti-protesters; media coverage of livestreamer reactions; live streamer reactions of live streamer reactions; and voyeurs interested in the spectacle. Communications that would have been previously dismissed as noise became key drivers of cultural and economic engagement, in other words, which makes it necessary to conclude by considering the impact that cultural and economic forms of engagement are having on the measuring and valuing of transmedia audiences in general and livestreaming spectators in particular.

Livestreaming and Transmedia Worldbuilding

While the record-breaking Twitch viewership *Hogwarts Legacy* launch received may seem minimal when compared to the attention that other forms of Harry Potter/Wizarding

World media garner, these comparisons fail to account for the specific role that livestreaming platforms are playing in the measuring and valuing of transmedia audiences. Put another way, if Twitch isn't selling content to viewers and attention to advertisers than what is it selling? If the *Hogwarts Legacy* launch provides an indicator, the answer is brand engagement and discoverability by way of the amplification and filtration of forms of communication previously classified as noise, which makes it necessary to unpack the impact that metrics and aesthetics of engagement are having on the broader transmedia worldbuilding process.

In Evans's (2020, p. 4) study of "engagement," she notes how the word is often used as a "catch all term" to describe audience experiences that could involve interactivity, social media use, community performativity, fandom, market research, the use of video on demand services, and civic participation. For Evans, engagement is a term with fundamentally positive connotations that take on different discursive formations in different industries. But at a macro-industrial level, it assumes the form of a commodity that converts audience experiences into data with the overall goal of creating new monetization opportunities (pp. 126–127). New monetization opportunities are attractive to investors and shareholders—which is why executives from Warner Bros. Discovery linked player engagement to the game's financial success—and news of this success correlated with a jump in Warner Bros. Discovery's stock price (Tayeb, 2023).

In the context of livestreaming platforms like Twitch, the case of the *Hogwarts Legacy* launch also points to the technical and cultural ascendency of engagement as a product and form. As a cultural product, Twitch transforms communications that would have been dismissed as noise into metrics of engagement. And as a cultural form, Twitch (2024) encourages the development of performance styles that are "engaging" and "authentic" irrespective of how many viewers are paying attention (Creator Camp).

Livestreaming's emphasis on engagement over attention is subtle but important, especially when considering the anxieties surrounding influencers and content creators, the debates surrounding post-broadcasting audience research (Partin, 2023), and the "complexities and murky practices of platform politics" (Brewer et al., 2023). A key problem stemming from the use of professional influencers in marketing communications is the tension between attention and authenticity, for example, with multiple marketing studies employing a semantics of engagement to correlate macro-influencers with smaller followings with higher perceptions of endorser authenticity (Kapitan et al., 2022; Pöyry et al., 2019). In a similar but slightly different fashion, research on the cultural form of livestreaming uses a semantics of immediacy, authenticity, and engagement to describe a range of emerging personalities (Hamilton et al., 2014), aesthetic strategies (Jodén & Strandell, 2022), and formats (Johnson, 2024a), with Consalvo et al. (2020) going as far as to describe the platform as "an authenticity engine."

Plenty of livestreamers are building meaningful, authentic relationships on Twitch without chasing viewers or endorsing products. The channels (Girlfriend Reviews, Zepla, and SilverVale) included in this study feature livestreamers who have attained a macro-influencing status, however, which means they have followings that are sizable and monetizable but not too large to the extent where the potential for reciprocal engagement with the chat is non-existent. It is the fostering of this potential for communications that feel reciprocal which requires a significant amount of work, for the potential would not exist without a consistent pattern of engagement that can be difficult (if not impossible) for macro-influencers to separate from the development of a personal brand.

When considering the positive connotations surrounding engagement (and authenticity) in the literature on livestreaming, events like the *Hogwarts Legacy* launch provide a useful means of connecting the playful ambiguity that is currently characterizing engagement to new tensions and contradictions that are not only a feature of "ludic economies," according to Giddings and Harvey (2018), but also emblematic of the increasingly ambiguous and abstract expansion of neoliberal corporate capitalism in general and platform governance in particular. Livestreaming's cultural product and form, from this perspective, are driven by a playful ambiguity which is central to the way that engagement functions as a technical and aesthetic driver of the messy assemblages that create content—resulting in content that is supposed to be immediate and authentic but also discoverable and marketable. It is the playfully ambiguous aspect of engagement, in other words, which allows platforms to derive value from communications that would have been previously dismissed as noise.

In summary, it is important to consider the technical and cultural processes of amplification (Colley & Moore, 2022; Phillips, 2018; Singh, 2018) and attenuation that were occurring during the *Hogwarts Legacy* launch and their relationship with the playfully ambiguous state of engagement. On February 6, 2023, an affective economy of joy, sadness, hate, and nostalgia started working in a concrete and particular way. On a technical level, it was a driver of engagement and discoverability for a transmedia franchise that resulted in the creation of brand and shareholder value. And on a cultural level, it was a refresher of long-standing associations that cast trans bodies as sources of hate and trans allies as bodies that are hateful. The case of the *Hogwarts Legacy* boycott, as a result, points to the ways in which platform logics of amplification and elevation are not only obscuring the needs of those who resist on the margins (Singh, 2018), but also extracting economic value from acts of resistance.

Conclusion

What happens when anti-brand activism takes place on a live streaming platform?

The events which occurred during *Hogwarts Legacy's* launch were unique, providing a window into similarities that

platforms share with legacy media corporate actors. Brands have a history of commercializing acts of resistance with advertising and marketing playing a key role in this process. The immediacy of livestreaming extends and complicates these relations by allowing protestors, influencers, and anti-protestors to communicate in ways that did not exist previously. These communications, which were previously understood as noise, can be engaging and therefore valuable from a transmedia branding perspective which points to several questions for further research. Is engagement being resisted in livestreaming communities and cultures? If so, what forms of engagement are being resisted and what do these acts of resistance look, sound, and feel like? Is the correlation between attention, engagement, and authenticity always positive for livestreamers, moderators, and viewers? What is clear is that new forms of engagement are having a significant but poorly understood impact on platforms, corporations, and markets, on the one hand, and activists, journalists, and influencers, on the other, necessitating further critical research on the subject.

By applying a case study methodology to a protest which occurred during *Hogwarts Legacy's* launch, this article makes several contributions to multiple areas of scholarship. From a cultural studies perspective, it defines livestreaming as a cultural product and form, connecting its product to the extraction of engagement metrics from affective economies and its form to the affective labor that livestreamers are performing for the purposes of developing engaging personas, parasocial relationships, and personal brands. From a media studies perspective, it demonstrates the insight that legacy media research on branding and culture jamming can provide when applied to the critical study of a livestreaming platform. Finally, from a platform studies perspective, it points to the limits of disciplinary efforts to distinguish platforms from legacy media corporate actors by demonstrating how platforms create discoverability value for transmedia brands from communications that were defined previously as noise, arguing that the playfully ambiguous character of engagement makes this uneven power relation possible.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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