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Digital Intimacy in Real Time: Live Streaming Gender and Sexuality

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Abstract

This article serves as the guest editors’ introduction to the Television and New Media special issue dedicated to gender and sexuality in live streaming. Live streaming is a key part of the contemporary digital media landscape; it sits at the center of wide-reaching shifts in how culture, entertainment, and labor are expressed and experienced online today. Gender and sexuality are crucial elements of live streaming. Across live streaming’s many forms, these elements manifest in myriad ways: from gendered performances to gender-based harassment, from LGBTQ community building to real-time sex work. This special issue models an interdisciplinary approach to studying gender and sexuality in live streaming, featuring scholarship from the humanities, social sciences, and human-computer interaction. It also serves as an impassioned call to those who study technological tools and platforms like live streaming to pay attention to the crucial roles that identity, power, embodiment, and intimacy play in these technologies. There can be no full cultural understanding of live streaming that does not address its entanglements with sexuality and gender.

Keywords

live streaming, gender, sexuality, digital media, video games, internet

The contemporary landscape of digital media is increasingly entwined with the practice of live streaming—the act of broadcasting live content, typically including both video and audio, to an audience via the internet. Much live streamed content is produced by individuals, rather than large media corporations, some of whom stream as hobbyists and others as professionals. Live streaming content can include everything

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from the broadcasting of video game play to scenes of “social eating” to real-time erotic performances. Indeed, the umbrella of live streaming encompasses a vast and complex world of people expressing themselves, forming countercultures and counterpublics, and participating in (and resisting) systems of regulation and power that manifest through the politics of digital platforms. Scholar who explore live streaming will find much to unpack in this issue: new interplays between the body and media, new ways that mediated longings are being made manifest, and new tensions between visibility and pushback for people who are marginalized due to gender, sexuality, race, disability, body type, and more. They will also find modes of media creation, consumption, and participation that strikingly resemble what has come before, shedding new light on the history of digital media as well as its present.

Though many North American readers may be familiar with Twitch (owned by Amazon), the vast ecosystem of live streaming also includes platforms based outside the United States, such as Korea’s AfreecaTV and China’s DouYu. It also encompasses platforms designed for sharing various types of content: from social media and video-sharing sites (such as Facebook and YouTube), video conferencing software (like Zoom and Google Meeting), and platforms for types of online sex work like webcam modeling (such as MyFreeCams and Chaturbate). While live streaming is often associated in popular discourse with video games and the rise of esports, the history of live streaming began outside of gaming with early forms of live broadcast and online “lifecasting” (Taylor 2018). Indeed, today we are seeing that history reemerge as “Just Chatting” content overtakes the popularity of top esports titles on a “gamer” platform like Twitch (D’Anastasio 2020). Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns in early 2020, live streaming consumption has skyrocketed (Stephen 2020). Live streamed content can now accrue millions of viewers and streaming is becoming a persistent feature of our lives online (Bruner 2021). It is no longer possible to study digital media and online environments today without thinking about, talking about, and often actively participating in live streaming.

Indeed, more than just a way of watching video on the internet, live streaming is a matter of how we communicate and connect with one another. Many people who do not consider themselves “streamers” are nonetheless live streaming content every day. Zoom and other software tools for live web conferencing and distance learning are, fundamentally, live streaming platforms, even if their broadcasts are often not open to the public. In meetings, coworkers live stream to one another; in classrooms, teachers live stream to their students; in socially-distanced gatherings, family and friends live stream themselves miming hugs across the internet. While it would be tempting to say that everyone is a live streamer now, the reality is, of course, more complicated. There are still many people who do not have sufficient and consistent access to the technologies necessary to participate in live streaming, despite the fact that public and private institutions often presume that all folks do. Even as live streaming technologies are often being described as making entertainment, work, and education more accessible—allowing viewers to tune in from the comfort and relative safety of their

homes—they raise myriad questions about how identity and privilege complicate popular notions of the democratizing power of new media.

Gender and sexuality are crucial elements of live streaming and are central to its many forms. This is most apparent when we talk about live streams that include explicitly sexual content, but is also highly relevant to gendered performances of video game play, intimate sensory experiences like autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR), and queer community building. More subtly, the structure of live streaming platforms themselves shape, and are shaped by, sexuality and gender. Policies about “community standards” on such platforms often reflect discriminatory attitudes toward women and LGBTQ+ folks, as well as moral panics about sexuality and sex work (Cullen and Ruberg 2019; Ruberg 2021). Paradoxically, tools for moderating chat and systems for reporting harassment—which is itself often tied to gender and sexual identity—are frequently weaponized by discriminatory participants as a way to further harass or even de-platform women streamers and LGBTQ streamers, as well as streamers of color (Brewer et al. 2020). These same tools are also commonly used to silence discourse around social justice. Likewise, the business and labor of streaming are intertwined with issues of gender and sexuality. The kind of work that goes into streaming, both in terms of self-presentation and in terms of affect, is highly dependent on the identity of the streamer. Turning a camera on oneself, often to invite viewers into one’s home, constitutes a fundamentally intimate act that requires the negotiation of complex norms around gendered self-presentation (Ruberg and Lark 2021). It is a practice that calls to mind the embodied intimacies of liveness that have long been explored within performance studies (Auslander 1999), as well as the ways that live programming in the early days of broadcast television brought new forms of media into the home (Spigel 1992). Live streaming invokes associations with the femme and the queer, even as certain corners of live streaming culture vehemently deny those connections.

Exploring the intersection of gender, sexuality, and live streaming can reveal as much about gender and sexuality in digital spaces as it does about live streaming itself. Scholars like Taylor (2018), Senft (2008), and Jones (2020) have done important work on the histories, cultures, and industries of live streaming, and others have begun addressing crucial topics like race (Gray 2017), affect (Woodcock and Johnson 2019), labor (Consalvo and Phelps 2019; Phelps and Consalvo 2020), and design (Robinson and Isbister 2020) as they relate to streaming platforms. However, issues related to gender and sexuality need more attention, both on platforms like Twitch, which have been a focus of live streaming scholarship to date, and on the range of other sites where self-broadcasters are performing their desires, identities, and efforts toward community building in real time. Our explicit focus on gender and sexuality in this special issue represents a critical intervention. This focus is necessary, in part, because streaming platforms and the cultures that surround them have often attempted to distance themselves from connections between streaming, sexuality, and gender as a way to insist on their own apolitical nature and assert their “legitimacy” within a straight-, white-, cisgender-, male-dominated technological sphere (Ruberg et al. 2019). Similarly, certain areas of research that focus on technology have often sidelined, or

even actively avoided, conversations about the centrality of embodiment and erotics in digital systems and the practices of their users (Brewer et al. 2006).

Yet gender and sexuality are not sideline issues, nor are they merely nods to diversity and inclusion. As the vibrant and wide-reaching array of articles presented in the special issue demonstrate, live streaming is at the center of digital life today, and it is impossible to meaningfully address the cultural implications of live streaming without paying thoughtful, intersectional attention to sexuality and gender.

An Interdisciplinary Call to Study Gender and Sexuality in Live Streaming

We offer this special issue simultaneously as a starting point, a provocation, and a nexus around which to build community. Our aim is to offer a collective first step toward a greater engagement with gender and sexuality in live streaming from across fields, including but not limited to: digital media studies from both the humanities and social sciences; fields that foreground critical cultural frameworks like gender studies, queer studies, and critical race studies; and technologically oriented fields like human-computer interaction (HCI), informatics, and computer science. In doing so, we are boldly asserting the importance, and the urgency, of centering what in a number of disciplines is still an under-addressed or even taboo topic—namely, the inextricable relationship between gender, sexuality, and what it means for different individuals to “go live” in our rapidly transforming societies.

The work presented here is rich and varied, but it is by no means comprehensive. There is still so much more to explore. To date, scholarly discourse about live streaming has often focused on discussions of video games (including esports and the business of gaming), overlooking a wide range of other socially significant practices. This is especially true outside of the humanities and qualitative social sciences, where quantitative and STEM researchers have the opportunity to provide new perspectives on the myriad subjects that the medium of live streaming encompasses. Similarly, there are many additional avenues to explore in the realm of intersectionality: namely the intertwining roles that gender, sexuality, race, class, and disability play within live streaming. In some areas of scholarship, researchers already find themselves at the very limits of their disciplines when they attempt to grapple with even one aspect of identity. Tackling multiple aspects of identity can thus be even more challenging, yet it is crucial if we want our understanding of live streaming to be thoughtful, nuanced, and socially just.

The conversation we begin here is aimed equally at those from the humanities and social sciences as well as those from more technology-oriented fields. We enthusiastically invite scholars from media studies, gender studies, sexuality studies, and queer studies to explore live streaming in new ways and at greater lengths. At the same time, we are calling to scholars from fields like HCI, which focuses on studying the ways in which humans interact with and through technological tools and digital platforms, to more fully embrace issues of gender and sexuality, as well as related issues of race and

class. Tackling such deeply social matters in technical fields that purport to concern themselves with the human condition still often feels like a taboo within informatics and computer science, and though a number of scholars in the field have made important contributions, explicitly feminist (e.g., Bardzell 2010), queer (e.g., Spiel et al. 2019), and trans-focused (e.g., Haimson et al. 2020) HCI research continues to occupy the margins of the discipline. With this special issue, we demonstrate that attending to gender and sexuality is both relevant to, and the responsibility of, all scholars of technology. Everyone who studies infrastructures and cultures like those found on live streaming platforms ought to be thinking about these topics. There is no complete understanding of the human experience that ignores gender and sexuality, and there can be no diverse, inclusive, or equitable HCI while gender and sexuality are discussed in hushed tones.

We know that there are already many scholars who care deeply about these topics, even though they go unsupported or are disempowered in studying these matters—especially graduate students and those who feel out of place in their disciplinary communities. For them, we hope this issue serves as a beacon and a springboard. And for those already pursuing research that explores the intersections of online media, gender, and sexuality: the articles contained here evidence the fact that you are not alone, and that your avenues of inquiry are both valid and vital. For scholars of technology, including those who approach systems research from a quantitative or design perspective, we hope to provide a set of possible starting points for thinking about how fields like HCI, computer science, engineering, and the more data-oriented areas of social science can begin to engage with gender and sexuality. These articles model a set of inroads that allow curious scholars to approach these issues for the first time, and they also provoke a set of questions all live streaming scholars should be asking: Who participates in live streaming and who does the technology exclude? How is the expression of our identities influenced or undermined by live streaming technology? What types of relationships, intimacies, and desires does live streaming technology support and which types does it refuse?

Intimacy, Power, Toxicity, Community

The authors featured in this special issue approach the topics of gender and sexuality in live streaming from a range of intertwining disciplinary perspectives. Though many discuss live streaming practices related to gaming, their insights also extend far beyond video games and gaming culture. The articles that follow draw attention to how identity and desire function within live streaming as a broader set of motivations and modes of interpersonal engagement. For example, some trace how individuals navigate the tensions of intimacy that arise from the use of live streaming technology. In this vein, Dan Lark addresses how the creep of video conferencing into our personal spaces forces intimacy among users. The often inequitable ways those tensions are borne out depends on users' identities, falling along gendered as well as socioeconomic lines. Complementing this work, Christine Tran traces the techniques that

femme-coded individuals use to flip the tensions of gendered power dynamics and make a living out of live streaming.

The issue also highlights the importance of attending to not only the individual experiences of live streamers, but also the cultural norms that emerge within broader communities of participation. Several authors engage with how LGBTQ+ streamers form communities through live streaming platforms and wrestle with questions posed by the online commodification of queerness. Christopher Persaud and Matthew Perks provide a detailed look at the way drag live streamers negotiate the expectations of their audience while trying to earn money by providing authentic queer representation for them. Jordan Youngblood's article, a close examination of a lesbian couple's live stream, acts as a resonant case study—demonstrating how the affective labor of queer streamers can produce an atmosphere of “cozy wholesomeness” for their communities. Many of the articles contained herein invite the analysis of live streaming through an intersectional lens, often through a focus on the ways that gender, sexuality, and race intersect with privilege and power in the United States. Going forward, researchers could build on this work to investigate more explicitly, for example, the interplays between queer streaming and race: Whose queer presence on live streaming platforms is celebrated and whose is marginalized? Who is seen as providing authentic queerness? Who is perceived as wholesome?

Several articles in this issue confront, or productively move beyond, perspectives on live streaming that center North America. For instance, Lin Song's article on sexual live streaming and pornography consumption among gay men in China allows us to see how live streaming technologies are bound up with issues of governance and self-expression that cross digital platforms. Offering a bridge between national contexts, Maria Ruotsalainen's contribution presents a cross-cultural perspective that examines the Western reception of a news story concerning the perceived femininity of an “older” Chinese streamer, and shows how gender and sexuality intersect with age and moral panics about the capacity of technology to distort identity.

Concerns regarding gender, especially feminism and toxic masculinity, are hotly debated within live streaming circles. Amanda Cullen's piece models how researchers might extend existing scholarly conversations by unpacking this debate through an analysis of the perceptions of feminist participation in the development of Twitch culture. Tom Welch demonstrates how masculinity and the performance of gendered relationships between men manifests through live streaming. Finally, Noel Brett's article illustrates how scholars from computer science can approach issues of gender and sexuality in live streaming by identifying the “heteronormative assemblages” that arise out of the interaction between collaborative networks of humans and technology. Together, these works show us how scholars from across fields can speak to and learn from one another through a shared investment in live streaming and its influential place within contemporary culture.

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Author Biographies

Dr. Bo Ruberg (they/them) is an associate professor in the Department of Film and Media Studies and the incoming co-editor of the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*. Their research explores gender and sexuality in digital media and digital cultures. They are the author of three monographs: *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (NYU Press, 2019), *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (2020), and *Sex Dolls at Sea: Imagined Histories of Sexual Technologies* (MIT Press, 2022). They are also the co-editor of *Queer Game Studies* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017) and *Live Streaming Culture* (MIT Press, forthcoming).

Johanna Brewer, Ph.D. (they/them) is an assistant professor of Computer Science at Smith College, and the director of research for AnyKey, an organization that advocates for diversity and inclusion in competitive gaming and live streaming. As a technology design activist, their work focuses on increasing inclusion on media platforms by collaborating with members of marginalized communities who challenge surveillance capitalism. They have co-authored numerous articles for leading human-computer interaction venues, including the proceedings of Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI) and Designing Interactive Systems (DIS).