Beyond Play in one of Yayoi Kasuma's Obliteration Room Installations.

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Special Issue

Beyond Play

edited by

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Issue 24 (2026)

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Gaming Streamers as Intermediaries: A Multi-Level Intermediation Framework across Self, Community, and Platformised Industry

Antonia Wurm, Paula Nitschke and Jeffrey Wimmer[i]

Abstract
Gaming streamers have become important actors in the communication of digital games, operating at the intersection of play, community interaction, and platform-based economies. Existing research has typically examined streaming through separate lenses of identity work, audience engagement, or platformisation, leaving their interrelations undertheorised. This article develops a multi-level intermediation framework of game streaming that integrates insights from communicative figurations, deep mediatization, and research on game and creator cultures. It conceptualises streaming as a set of intermediation processes connecting self, community, and platformised industry across micro-, meso-, and macro-level dynamics. The analysis shows that intermediation emerges through cross-level dynamics rather than within isolated domains. At the micro-meso level, practices of self-presentation stabilise participation while audience feedback shapes identity performance. At the meso-macro level, community interaction is rendered measurable, transforming participation into visibility and economic value while simultaneously enabling contestation. At the micro-macro interface, platform governance and regulation impose structurally asymmetrical conditions that require creators to be hyper-flexible and leave the vulnerable to pre-structuring conditions. By foregrounding these dynamics, the conceptual framework provides an analytical tool that guides and structures future empirical research on streamers and streaming in digital gamevironments.

Keywords: Audience Practices, Communicative Figurations, Digital Labour, Game Live Streaming, Mediatisation, Platformisation, Streamers, gamevironments

To cite this article: Wurm, A., Nitschke, P. and Wimmer, J., 2026. Gaming Streamers as Intermediaries: A Multi-Level Intermediation Framework across Self, Community, and Platformised Industry. *Gamevironments* 24, 187-222. Available at https://journals.suub.uni-bremen.de/index.php/gamevironments.

Introduction

Live streaming of games has become a central mode of communication in contemporary game environments, embedding gameplay in platform structures, economic arrangements and networked forms of community participation. Game live streaming has evolved into a major cultural and economic force (Johnson and Woodcock 2019a). Around 18 million people in Germany watch gaming streams daily, and 54 percent report that such streams influence their purchasing decisions (Steininger 2023) while also contributing to opinion formation in relation to games, gaming cultures, and platform-related issues (Granow 2025). Streaming therefore plays an increasingly important role in how games are marketed and socially embedded (Littleford 2024).

As gaming streamers bridge the gap between different communication contexts, they have become important intermediaries: Their role has been described as hybrid (Hilvert-Bruce et al. 2018, Johnson and Woodcock 2019b, Wulf, Schneider and Beckert 2020), oscillating between entertainment, product reviewing, journalism, advertisement and, in some cases, political communication (Taylor 2018, Woodcock and Johnson 2021, Nitschke 2024). Existing research has offered important insights on the hybrid nature of practices, genres and the role of game related media and shows how boundaries between journalism, influencer communication, and entertainment have become increasingly porous on platform-based media environments (Bigl and Stoppe 2023, Zhu, Yan and Lu 2026).

This hybridity becomes visible when professional boundaries become institutionally blurred. A telling example is the former games journalist Maurice Weber receiving the award for Streamer of the Year at the German Computer Game Award (Deutscher Computerspielpreis 2024). A similar dynamic is evident in the collaboration between

the popular German streamer HandOfBlood and Green Party politician Robert Habeck during the 2025 German federal election campaign, where entertainment-based reach was mobilised for political communication. Such cases indicate that streamers have established a position in the public sphere, contribute to cultural debates and to processes of public communication, particularly in politically themed and issue-specific streaming contexts (Grub, Wurm and Kauk 2025, Henn 2023).

To capture these hybrid roles more precisely, some key conceptual distinctions need to be introduced. In this article, gaming streamers are understood as individuals or groups who produce and perform live-streamed gameplay on digital platforms, combining elements of gameplay, commentary, and real-time audience interaction. While they share certain characteristics with influencers or other content creators – e.g., audience trust, visibility, and perceived authenticity (Abidin 2018) – their practices are distinguished by real-time interaction and the situational and processual nature of live streaming, as well as by the centrality of gameplay as a mediating element (Woodcock and Johnson 2021). Let's Plays, by contrast, refer to pre-recorded or edited gameplay videos. Research on Let's Plays and gameplay formats provides important points of comparison. While both formats rely on gameplay-related communication, empirical studies show that asynchronous Let's Plays foreground editorial control and post-production, whereas the live streaming of gameplay intensifies real-time interaction, affective labour, and platform dependency (Wurm and Wimmer 2024, Montag 2025). Finally, the term platformised industry refers to the interconnected constellation of platform corporations, creator-economy infrastructures, game industry actors, and regulatory regimes that structure visibility, value production, and governance under conditions of platformisation (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2018, Poell, Nieborg and Duffy 2021).

However, many existing studies focus primarily on specific aspects or contexts of streaming and pay less attention to the situated and multi-perspectival nature of streamers. As a result, the public role of streamers remains insufficiently theorized. One reason is that gaming and game live streaming have long been perceived primarily as entertainment phenomena rather than as arenas of public communication (Taylor 2018). Accordingly, streamers were rarely examined through the lens of public sphere theory, journalism studies, or research on public intermediaries, but instead through perspectives on play, fandom, and participatory culture (Burgess and Green 2018).

While prior research has generated important insights into micro-level interactional practices (Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne 2014, Jodén 2022), labour conditions (Bingham 2017, Consalvo, Zanescu and Lajeunesse 2020) and audience practices (Li, Wang and Liu 2020, Pagáč, Bernhaupt and Kriglstein 2025), other work has also addressed macro-level forces, including the infrastructural power of platforms, the strategic role of streamers within platformised economies (Casilli and Posada 2019, Partin 2020), and the professionalisation and commercialisation of creator cultures – resulting in a fundamentally altered public relevance of streaming (Partin 2019, Roca-Trenchs, López-Borrull and Lalueza 2024). However, these perspectives have rarely been systematically integrated.

This article takes this current state of research as its starting point and addresses the need for a more systematic conceptualisation of gaming streamers by proposing an intermediation framework of game streaming, a multi-level analytical model that conceptualizes gaming streamers as intermediaries operating across three interrelated levels: self at the micro level, capturing individual practices, values, role orientations, and biographical trajectories; community at the meso level,

encompassing audiences, networks, agencies, and platform navigation; and platformised industry at the macro level, referring to the game industry, regulatory environments, gatekeeping processes, and platformisation. From this perspective, streaming can be understood as a form of communication that continuously links individual practices, community dynamics, and platformised industry structures.

Intermediation is understood here not as the simple transmission of content (Beck and Donges 2020), but as a set of relational communicative processes through which streamers actively structure and connect the different domains of communication. More specifically, these processes involve the coordination of visibility, the alignment of audience expectations, and the bridging of meanings between gameplay, audiences, and platform-based economic and infrastructural conditions. Rather than focusing on specific practices or formats, the proposed framework systematically conceptualises intermediation as a cross-level relational process that connects self, community, and platformised industry.

The analysis draws on the theories of mediatisation (Krotz 2007) as well as deep mediatisation (Couldry and Hepp 2017), and recent work on communicative figurations (Hepp and Hasebrink 2018) and gamevironments (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014). Our concept directs attention to the broader communicative and cultural contexts that emerge around digital games (Elmezeny and Wimmer 2018). Rather than treating games as isolated media artefacts, we conceptualise gaming as a discursive-material entanglements of actors, media technologies, practices, values, and institutions that extend far beyond gameplay itself.

As a conceptual contribution the article aims to develop a theoretically grounded framework that can guide and structure future empirical research. Before section three analyses the three levels self, community and industry, section two outlines the theoretical foundations of the intermediation framework.

Theoretical Lens: Conceptualising Gaming Streamers in Deeply Mediatised and Platformised Environments

This section provides the conceptual justification for the definitions introduced above by situating gaming streamers within theories of deep mediatisation, communicative figurations, and platform based cultural production. Contemporary society is fundamentally shaped by media-related processes, which increasingly permeate social life and interpersonal relations (Hepp 2020). In this context, communicative figurations serve as an analytical tool for capturing the relational and processual nature of social formations by focusing on "patterns of communicative interdependence" that unfold across different media environments (Hepp and Hasebrink 2018, 15). Rather than viewing social groups as static or predefined units, the approach conceptualizes them as dynamic configurations constituted through ongoing communicative practices. According to the model, a communicative figuration consists of three interrelated dimensions: a constellation of actors, the communicative practices linking these actors, and a media ensemble that structures and enables these practices (Hepp and Hasebrink 2018). The constellation of actors refers to the participants involved in a particular social domain, including their roles, interdependencies, and power relations. These constellations can range from small groups such as families or teams to broad collectives such as publics, organizations, or online communities (ibid.). The second dimension, communicative practices, addresses the specific ways in which actors interact and how these interactions

contribute to the reproduction and transformation of social relationships (Couldry and Hepp 2017). Finally, the media ensemble encompasses the entire set of media technologies, platforms, and infrastructures that shape communicative practices and mediate actor relations. This includes not only traditional media and digital platforms, but also underlying algorithms, interfaces, monetization systems, and devices that structure how communication is possible (Hepp 2020). A fourth, cross-cutting component is the shared frame of relevance, a thematic orientation that gives coherence to a figuration by signalling what matters to participants and how they make sense of their interactions (Hepp and Hasebrink 2018). This frame can include shared interests, values, cultural symbols, or expectations about behaviour. As communicative figurations are dynamic, these frames evolve over time as actors, practices, and media environments change.

Game streaming environments, such as Twitch, YouTube Live, and Kick, can be seen as complex figurations formed through dense, multimodal, and highly interactive communication patterns characteristic of game live streaming. Following recent work on gamevironments, these platforms can be understood as part of broader gaming-related communicative figurations that extend beyond gameplay itself and encompass the social, cultural, economic, and infrastructural environments surrounding digital games (Schwarzenegger et al. 2025). The constellation of actors in this domain includes streamers, consumers, moderators, platform administrators, sponsors, and algorithmic systems that influence discoverability, visibility, and monetisation (Johnson and Woodcock 2019c, Lamerichs 2021). Streamers often perform multiple roles simultaneously, including entertainer, entrepreneur, community manager, and micro-influencer (Johnson 2021). Consumers likewise assume various roles, from passive lurkers to active chat participants, moderators, donors, or long-term community members (Sheng and Kairam 2020). These actor

relations illustrate the relational and role-based nature of figurations as described by Hepp and Hasebrink (2018).

The communicative practices in streaming communities are varied. Live audiovisual broadcasting forms the core practice, but it is complemented by synchronous chat interaction, emote-based communication[ii], donation messages, and ritualised forms of engagement such as greetings, insider jokes, recurring formats, and shared celebrations of in-stream events (Johnson and Woodcock 2019c). These practices extend into asynchronous channels like Discord servers, Reddit forums, TikTok, or YouTube, which exemplifies the inherently cross-media character of contemporary communication (Breiter, Hasebrink and Hepp 2018). Because viewers respond in real time, streamers constantly adapt their performance, which reinforces the reciprocal and processual character of the figuration.

The media ensemble structuring these practices includes not only the streaming platform's technical affordances, such as chat windows, recommendation systems, moderation tools, and monetization mechanisms, but also an external ecosystem of media and devices. Smartphones, notification systems, editing tools, capture cards, and social media infrastructures form a distributed technological environment that shapes how communicative practices are performed, sustained, and shared (Hepp 2020). Algorithmic visibility, for example, plays a significant role in determining which streamers gain prominence (Glotfelter 2019, Verwiebe et al. 2024) which content is highlighted, and how communities grow, making platforms themselves active participants in the figuration (Couldry and Hepp 2017).

Within this environment, game-streaming communities develop a shared frame of relevance centred around gaming cultures, entertainment, community belonging,

participatory practices, and norms regarding viewer-streamer interaction. This shared orientation creates coherence and identity: viewers feel they are part of a collective, while streamers cultivate distinctive community cultures through rituals, symbols, rules, and expectations (Burgess and Green 2018). The frame of relevance also includes normative dimensions such as moderation guidelines, expectations regarding behavioural conduct, and community ethics, many of which are influenced by platform governance and wider gaming culture norms (Seering and Kairam 2023). From a figurational perspective, gaming streaming appears as a relational, multi-level phenomenon in which individual practices, audience dynamics, and platform infrastructures are inseparable. Streamers emerge in this framework not merely as individual media producers, but as structurally positioned intermediaries who continuously mediate between participation, platform governance and value production across micro-, meso- and macro-levels.

While this theoretical lens specifies how these mediations unfold, it leaves open a more precise question concerning the actor position of streamers within platformised media environments. To further specify what kind of cultural producers gaming streamers are – and why they are particularly exposed to platform dependency, audience co-construction and entrepreneurial pressures – it is useful to briefly situate them within the literature on platform-based content creation.

Recent research in Creator Studies has conceptualised content creators as platform-based cultural producers whose work is characterised by the professionalised production of original content, continuous interaction with audiences, and a structural dependence on digital platforms for visibility and monetisation (Cunningham and Craig 2021, Poell, Nieborg and Duffy 2021). Creators operate as entrepreneurial actors who combine creative, affective, and economic labour under conditions of platformisation, navigating algorithmic systems, monetisation

infrastructures and shifting governance regimes (Abidin 2018, Poell, Nieborg and Duffy 2021).

Gaming streamers can be understood as a specific and particularly illustrative form of content creators. While they share core characteristics of platform-based creation – such as audience co-construction, monetisation through platform infrastructures and high degrees of platform dependency – their practices are further shaped by the liveness, synchronicity and participatory intensity of streaming (Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne 2014, Taylor 2018). Unlike many other creator formats, gaming streams are constituted through real-time interaction, continuous performance and immediate audience feedback, which intensifies affective labour and strengthens parasocial and communal bonds (Leith 2021, Woodcock and Johnson 2019). Conceptualising gaming streamers as platformised content creators therefore helps to situate their intermediation function within broader transformations of cultural production, while also highlighting the specific figurational dynamics that emerge from live, participatory media environments (Hepp and Hasebrink 2018).

Taken together, these perspectives conceptualise game streaming as a relational and processual phenomenon constituted through communicative interdependence. However, they remain less explicit in analytically specifying how these interdependencies are structured and operationalised. They show that relations matter but provide somewhat limited analytical tools to further explore these relations. Building on this, the following section develops an intermediaton framework of game streaming that conceptualises gaming streamers across three interrelated dimensions self, community, and platformised industry. The focus on self builds on creator studies and captures identity work and role orientation, community reflects the figurational emphasis on communicative interdependence and audience

co-construction, and platformised industry draws on platformisation research to address infrastructural and economic conditions.

Three Contextual Dimensions: Self, Community, and Platformised Industry

Based on the theories outlined in section 2, platforms are conceptualised as media ensembles in which actors at the micro (self), meso (community), and macro (industry) levels are interconnected. Rather than treating the three dimensions as hierarchical ordered analytical layers, the intermediation framework understands them as mutually constitutive sites of mediation (see figure 1). This multi-level perspective resonates with the remit of gamevironments, which foregrounds how digital games are embedded in broader cultural, societal, and mediated environments (Schwarzenegger et al. 2025).

Across these dimensions, intermediation can be understood as processes through which streamers coordinate visibility, align audience expectations, and translate meanings across different communicative contexts. Next, we specify each dimension in detail and link it to existing research on game streaming to show how intermediation is constituted across self, community, and platformised industry.

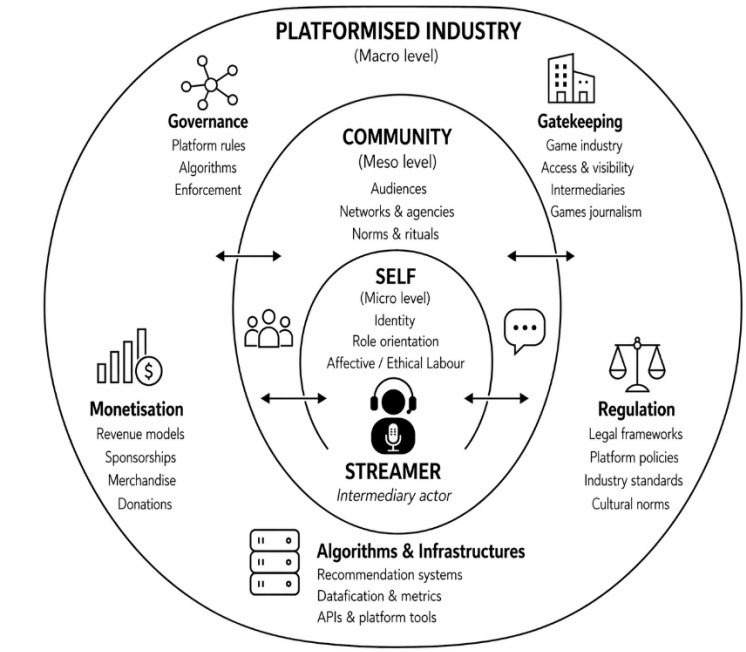

Figure 1: Intermediation Framework of Game Streaming

The Micro-Level of Identity, Motivation, and Personal Practices

At the micro level, the dimension of self-captures how streamers' identities, motivations, and labour practices emerge under platformised conditions and how these personal orientations perform intermediary functions by aligning audience expectations, negotiating visibility and positioning the self within platforms and industry logics.

Self-Perception and Role Orientation

Streamers as persons are shaped by biographical trajectories, personal values, cultural socialisation, and evolving role perceptions (Freeman and Wohn 2020, Jackson 2020). Streaming is therefore an ongoing process of identity work, ethical negotiation, and public self-performance. Streamers construct and curate personas that align with the roles they wish to embody (Jackson 2023), such as entertainer, educator, journalist or even activist. These role choices are closely tied to how streamers position themselves

within digital publics and how they anticipate and align audience expectations while responding to commercial opportunities.

Taylor's ethnography (2018) demonstrates that gaming streamers engage in sustained persona construction, emphasising authenticity, humour, expertise, or intimacy to cultivate trust and recognition. Bingham (2017) shows how creators navigate tensions between self-expression and emerging professional expectations. This aligns with Nitschke's (2024) findings on political online influencers, who likewise inhabit hybrid public roles that continuously oscillate between personal expression, public communication, and strategic visibility. Self-perception is dynamic rather than fixed. Many streamers begin as hobbyists motivated by enjoyment, community, or creative expression (Johnson 2021), but their role orientations evolve as audiences grow, visibility stabilises, and professional opportunities arise.

The self-dimension also captures the ethical dilemmas streamers navigate in their intermediary position. They must continuously reconcile authenticity and entertainment value with commercial partnerships and responsibilities toward their audiences (Bowman et al. 2020, Houssard et al. 2023, Hund 2023). Micro-level moral reasoning shapes everyday practices, such as how transparently sponsorships should be communicated, whether and how to intervene in hate speech or political expression in chat, and where to draw boundaries between personal life and public persona. These value-based decisions influence monetisation strategies, moderation practices, and content selection and thereby shape the normative orientation of streaming communities.

Furthermore, streamers' self-presentation is embedded in broader social structures. Decisions about which persona to embody reflect not only individual preference, but

also culturally sedimented norms around gender, race, class, and professionalism in streaming cultures (Jackson 2023, Woodcock and Johnson 2019). The self-dimension conceptualises identity work not merely as personal expression but as a form of intermediary labour and shows how intermediation is enacted through situated practices of self, where visibility, audience expectations, and commercial logics are continuously negotiated.

Biographical and Cultural Socialisation

The self-dimension further involves biographical gaming and media socialisation as a foundational source of role orientation. Research in media and game studies has shown that digital games function as long-term experiential spaces that become sedimented within individual biographies and contribute to the constitution of subjectivity and identity (Wimmer 2012, Wimmer 2020). These biographically grounded media practices inform not only gameplay preferences, but also communicative styles, evaluative frameworks, and modes of public self-presentation. A streamer socialised in competitive e sports contexts is therefore more likely to foreground values such as optimisation, performance, and measurable success, whereas individuals shaped by narrative driven or reflexive game cultures may privilege storytelling, atmosphere, and interpretative depth (Wimmer 2020). This dimension thus directly links biographical experience to processes of value formation and role orientation within streaming and gaming publics.

Biographical trajectories may influence normative orientations that are later performed, negotiated, and transformed in streaming practice. These orientations shape how streamers interpret audience expectations, how they relate to platform norms, and how they engage with industrial logics. Within the framework, biographical socialisation therefore pre-structures how streamers position themselves

as intermediaries between specific audience cultures, platform environments, and industry expectations.

Motivations and Affective Economies

The self-dimension also encompasses the emotional, motivational, and entrepreneurial labour that characterises streaming under platformised conditions. Research on motivations demonstrates that both viewing and producing game live streams are driven by a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Viewers engage for entertainment, social interaction, information, and a sense of belonging (Gros et al. 2017, Li, Wang and Liu 2020, Sjöblom and Hamari 2017). More recent work shows that enjoyment is shaped not only by gameplay but by the social atmospheres and platform-specific affordances that foster shared presence and collective meaning-making (Hilvert-Bruce et al. 2018, Speed, Burnett and Robinson 2023). Streamers, in turn, combine intrinsic motivations (play, creativity, self-expression) with extrinsic incentives such as visibility, income, sponsorships, and career aspirations (Johnson and Woodcock 2019a, Littleford 2024, Pagáč, Bernhaupt and Kriglstein 2025).

Central to this constellation is their affective labour (Woodcock and Johnson 2019). Streamers mobilise and regulate emotions through performing enthusiasm, sociability, or intimacy to sustain parasocial bonds and engagement (Consalvo, Zanescu and Lajeunesse 2020, Taylor 2018). This is reinforced by platformised demands of always-on availability, continuous performance, and responsiveness to fluctuating metrics. The result is a form of precarious digital labour, in which identity, emotional energy, and entrepreneurial self-management intersect within platform-governed game environments (Bingham 2017, Cisternino 2024, Jackson 2023). This motivational and affective constellation constitutes a key mechanism of

intermediation through which emotional engagement is stabilised as audience loyalty, platform visibility, and monetisable attention.

Community: The Meso-Level of Audiences, Networks, and Platform Navigation

While the self-dimension focuses on individual identity work and role orientation, community encompasses the social structures that surround and interact with streamers, including audiences, moderation teams, agencies, fan networks, and broader social media communities. Within the framework, the community dimension describes the relational context as the arena of intermediation in which practices of self-performance become socially anchored and the self is connected to broader communicative and economic dynamics.

Audience Co-Construction and Participatory Dynamics

Consumers of gaming streamers are not passive spectators but active co-producers of streaming environments. Through real-time chat interaction, emotes, donations, and audience commentary, viewers co-construct the flow, tone, and content of streams (Taylor 2018). Rather than addressing a distant or abstract audience, streamers interact with a synchronously present and interactively constituted public (Woodcock and Johnson 2019). This co-construction challenges traditional media power dynamics, as streamers must navigate continuous micro-feedback loops between entertainment demands, authenticity pressures, and audience expectations. Ethnographic and interactionist studies demonstrate how viewers influence content by proposing challenges, steering conversations, or responding collectively to in-game events (Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne 2014, Jodén 2022). Such interaction rituals generate emotional energy and solidarity, thereby stabilising shared expectations and reinforcing collective forms of participation, contributing to a shared sense of community and collective identity (Jodén 2022).

Audience co-construction functions as a core mechanism through which intermediation is practically enacted in streaming environments. Streamers must continuously reconcile heterogeneous audience expectations with coherent performances while adjusting to platform-specific visibility logics. Empirical research on live streaming platforms indicates that participatory engagement constitutes a central mechanism through which interaction can become algorithmically legible and monetised under conditions of platformisation. Studies on Twitch show how subscriptions, donations, gifting practices, and sponsorships systematically link audience participation to revenue generation, while at the same time producing pronounced economic inequalities and strong dependencies on platform infrastructures (Johnson and Woodcock 2019b, Partin 2019, Houssard et al. 2023). From a gamevironments perspective, these practices form affective economies through which values, norms, and cultural meaning circulate across platforms.

Agencies, Networks, and Professionalization

On the meso level, influencer agencies, e-sports organisations, and talent management networks increasingly mediate the relationships between streamers, brands, platforms, and audiences. These intermediaries coordinate sponsorship campaigns, negotiate contracts, manage brand partnerships, and support creators in navigating legal and fiscal frameworks (Woodcock and Johnson 2021). Their involvement formalises and professionalises what originally emerged as informal, community-driven practices, thereby integrating streaming more deeply into structured regimes of commercial labour.

Within the framework, these organisations institutionalise and commercialise intermediation by converting community engagement into marketable visibility and

economic value. This reconfigures how streaming is embedded within broader dynamics of creative labour, as community relations become increasingly entangled with sponsorship logics. Creators must therefore operate within an ecosystem in which economic pressures and community norms intersect.

Streams as Third Places and Interaction Rituals

Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne (2014) conceptualise Twitch streams as virtual third places. These are social environments in which informal communities form around shared practices and playful interaction. Viewers gather not only to watch gameplay, but also to socialise, participate in insider humour, and maintain relational continuity over time, thereby generating stable forms of belonging. Subsequent research has expanded this perspective by showing how recurring interaction rituals such as greetings, shared humour, and repeated formats generate collective identity (Jodén 2022).

Within the framework, these third-place dynamics provide the social infrastructure of intermediation through which communication is stabilised and routinised. They allow streamers to anchor public visibility in intimate communal relations while simultaneously rendering these relations scalable and platform-visible. Streamers thus operate at the intersection of locally embedded community cultures and algorithmically amplified publics.

In practice, streamers continuously adjust their self-presentation to community expectations while ensuring that these interactions remain visible and economically viable within platform systems. In this sense, the meso-level of community highlights how intermediation is constituted through collective practices that coordinate platform-based community participation with value creation, as documented in

empirical studies on monetisation, audience engagement, and platform governance in live streaming environments (Johnson and Woodcock 2019b, Houssard et al. 2023).

Industry: The Macro-Level of Gatekeeping, Commercial Structures, and Platformisation

The third dimension, platformised industry, corresponds to the macro level. It encompasses the combined institutional forces of platform corporations, game industry actors, and regulatory regimes. Within the framework, this dimension specifies how intermediation is structurally conditioned by platform governance, commercial infrastructures, and regulatory actors that shape how visibility, community participation and value creation can emerge in game environments.

The Game Industry's Strategic Use of Streamers

Game studios, distributors, and publishers increasingly treat streamers as central marketing and visibility channels. They influence how games are discovered, evaluated, and discussed, thereby shaping the organisation of visibility in game markets (Johnson and Woodcock 2019b). As a result, game success has become closely tied to coverage by influential streamers, making them important intermediaries between the industry and players (Littleford 2024).

Industrial actors shape visibility and credibility through selective access regimes, including early builds, sponsored formats and invitations to press events. Such practices function as institutionalised gatekeeping mechanisms, regulating access to visibility and audiences (Huang and Morozov 2025). This gatekeeping regimes also structures discursive agendas by influencing which games enter public conversation, which genres become normalised, and which political or cultural issues are foregrounded or marginalised within streaming cultures (Gray 2017). Through these

selective access regimes, intermediation is structurally organised as streamers' positions depend on industry-controlled visibility infrastructures.

Platformisation and Infrastructural Power

The dominant global platform companies operate not as neutral intermediaries but as socio-technical infrastructures that govern participation through algorithms, datafication, monetisation systems, and content policies (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2018). From the viewpoint of communicative figurations, platforms must be understood as actors. They set rules, define the economic conditions of participation, regulate public visibility, decide, which forms of expression are incentivised or suppressed, and mediate interactions between creators, audiences, and brands (Hepp and Hasebrink 2018, Cunningham and Craig 2021, Poell, Nieborg and Duffy 2021). This structural dependence renders creators vulnerable to sudden changes of platform rules – e.g., revenue splits or copyright takedowns – that have immediate effects on audience numbers, income, and community stability. Empirical studies document how streamers adapt production rhythms, interaction styles, and scheduling strategies in response to platform metrics and opaque governance mechanisms (Partin 2020, Verwiebe et al. 2024, Flonk and Garvey 2025). The infrastructural power of platforms not only reveals the vulnerability and precarity of platform workers, but also indicates a more profound capacity to shape processes of identity formation.

Regulation and Governance

Regulatory frameworks shape the conditions under which intermediation becomes legitimate or contested. Streamers operate at the intersection of multiple legal and governance regimes, including influencer disclosure rules, advertising law, copyright regulation, and youth media protection, as well as the rule systems imposed by

global platforms. These overlapping regimes generate tensions between national legislation and platform-specific norms. A prominent example is the live opening of loot boxes on stream, which has been widely criticised as an inducement to gambling, especially for underage audiences. While national regulations increasingly problematise loot boxes as a form of gambling-related practice, platform policies and monetisation systems often continue to incentivise them (Abarbanel and Johnson 2020, Grosemans et al. 2023). In this fragmented environment, streamers act as de facto public communicators without being embedded in traditional institutional structures that traditionally provide guidance, accountability, and oversight (Nitschke 2024). This blurring of contexts expands streaming into public communication, raising questions of accountability and responsibility. The conflicting normative demands that emerge at the macro level from overlapping institutional contexts require forms of identity work at the micro level that are sufficiently flexible to integrate contradictions in the form of bricolage.

Intermediation across Levels

Intermediation does not reside at a single level of analysis, but is produced through cross-level dynamics, in which practices, relations, and structures continuously shape one another. This perspective challenges approaches that analyse streamers, audiences, or platforms in isolation, and instead foregrounds an understanding of intermediation that resonates with the idea of complex game environments. Building on the in-depth analysis of each dimension presented in the sections above, the following sections focus on the entanglement of these dimensions and explicate the cross-level dynamics through which intermediation unfolds.

Self and Community: Coordinating Identity and Participation

Streamers' self-perceptions and role orientations are shaped by audience feedback, interaction rituals, and community expectations. They continuously negotiate how authenticity, humour, expertise, or political commentary should be displayed in ways that resonate with their audiences. At the same time, streamers do not simply respond to existing communities, but actively produce the kinds of communities that form around them, shaping norms, values, and interpretive frameworks. In this relational dynamic, practices of self-presentation stabilize participation and reinforce collective forms of belonging, while audience feedback in turn informs how identities are performed (Jodén 2022, Nitschke 2024).

Community and Platformised Industry: Transforming Participation into Economic Value and Legitimacy

Communities serve as key sites in which interaction between streamer practices and industrial interests are organised. Highly engaged audiences may demand transparency or challenge exploitative monetisation, yet they also amplify industry strategies through sponsored events and platform-driven incentive systems. Through these dynamics, participatory engagement is rendered measurable and becomes a key driver of visibility and economic value within platform environments. At the same time communities may function both as amplifiers of platform and industry logics and as sites of contestation in which the legitimacy of these practices is negotiated. In this sense, intermediation at the meso-level consists in the ongoing coordination of participation, valuation, and visibility.

Self and Platformised Industry: Platform-Shaped Performance and Vulnerability

What characterises the dynamic between the self and the platformised industry is its structural asymmetry. Streamers' micro-level choices are continually shaped by

macro-level forces such as platform governance (Jackson and Johnson 2024, Pagáč, Bernhaupt and Kriglstein 2025) and state-level platform regulation. As these frameworks are subject to constant change, streamers must remain continuously responsive and adaptable. At the same time, platform-defined rules and legal regulations represent distinct institutional contexts that may impose conflicting normative demands. As a result, intermediation at this interface is characterised not only by alignment but also by ongoing negotiation and tension, as streamers continuously respond to and navigate structurally preconfigured environments.

Taken together, these dynamics show that intermediation is not located at a single level, but unfolds across levels through processes of coordination, stabilisation, and transformation. Intermediation thus does describe dynamic process through which relations between practices, communities, and infrastructures are continuously produced and contested.

Conclusion

This article has introduced a multi-level intermediation framework for analysing gaming streamers as actors operating across self, community, and platformised industry. It has shown that intermediation does not reside at a single level of analysis, but emerges through cross-level dynamics in which practices, relations, and structures continuously shape one another. In doing so, the framework shifts the analytical focus from isolated actors or platform structures to the relational production of platformised game environments (Couldry and Hepp 2017, Hepp and Hasebrink 2018). In this sense, intermediation is not a discrete role but a constitutive process through which platformised game environments take shape.

By conceptualising streaming as a process of intermediation, the analysis brings together fragmented strands of research that have variously focused on identity work, audience interaction, or platform economies in isolation (Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne 2014, Woodcock and Johnson 2021, Abidin 2018). Instead, it demonstrates how these domains are interconnected through ongoing processes of intermediation. The concept of gamevironments provides a useful perspective for situating these dynamics within broader cultural and societal contexts of digital gaming (Schwarzenegger et al. 2025). While our intermediation framework focuses on the relational processes connecting self, community, and platformised industry, gamevironments draw attention to the wider environments in which these processes unfold. From this perspective, gaming streamers can be understood as intermediary actors whose communicative practices contribute to shaping these environments across micro-, meso-, and macro-level dynamics.

The analysis also points to the fact that these processes are shaped by structural asymmetries, inequalities and tensions. Platform governance, industrial gatekeeping, and regulatory frameworks do not simply influence streaming practices, but define the conditions under which forms of intermediation can emerge (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2018, Partin 2020, Poell, Nieborg and Duffy 2021). At the same time, streamers and their communities actively respond to, negotiate, and occasionally contest these conditions, illustrating how intermediation is continuously produced within unequal but dynamic relations. This makes visible the extent to which the public life of digital games is not only mediated, but actively constituted through such intermediary dynamics (Taylor 2018, Woodcock and Johnson 2019a).

Despite these contributions, the framework has its limitations. As a conceptual contribution, it does not draw on original empirical data and therefore requires

empirical validation. In addition, it is primarily grounded in Western platform ecosystems and focuses on game live streaming, which may limit its applicability to other contexts. The framework should therefore be understood as a tool intended to guide and structure future empirical research rather than as a fully validated explanatory model.

Future research may advance this framework by examining cross-platform circulation, comparative cultural contexts, and forms of creator labour beyond gaming. More critically, scholarship should investigate the democratic and normative implications of intermediary roles. This includes further attention to the normative implications of such processes, particularly with regard to the distribution of visibility, the role of communities in amplifying or contesting content, and the evolving responsibilities of creators as public communicators within loosely regulated environments (Henn 2023, Nitschke 2024).

Taken together, the framework provides a systematic lens for understanding streaming as a deeply mediatised and platform-dependent environment. It offers a conceptual foundation for analysing how gaming streamers contribute to shaping the cultural, economic, and communicative dimensions of contemporary game environments, not as isolated actors, but through the continuous and contested processes of intermediation that connect self, community, and platformised industry.

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[ii] An emote on Twitch is a small image or symbol that viewers use in chat to express feelings or emotional reactions.