

Performative Authenticity: Examining Masculinity and Labour of Vietnamese Game Livestreamers

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INTRODUCTION

Game livestreaming has become crucial in online cultural production and identity negotiation, with game streamers performing for grassroots entertainment and more importantly to sustain platformed livelihoods. Central to game creators is their performances of authenticity, which Woodcock and Johnson (2019) have framed it as a form of affective and aspirational labour (Duffy 2017), the work of turning passions into careers, where streamers work to appear spontaneous, intimate, and real while enduring the pressures of consistency, visibility, and monetisation. In Western contexts, Ruberg and Lark (2021) highlight that game streamers often broadcast in living rooms, home offices, or blur their bedroom backgrounds to resist the highly feminised and erotic appeal of bedrooms. This paper speaks to these discussions but situates in Vietnamese contexts to demonstrate how authenticity and streaming from the bedrooms take on a different meaning in gendered performances and working practices

CONCEPTUALISING VIETNAMESE GAME LIVESTREAMERS

Vietnam is the second-largest gaming market in Southeast Asia, with game streaming accounting for approximately 45% of all online content consumption, often attributed to its young population (Appota Group 2022). This expansion builds on the informal gaming market from *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) policy to the normalisation of e-sports and mobile games (Phan 2023). The streamers do livestream in bedrooms with highly casual manners, regardless of their gender. Yet, this denotes a sign of high informality, rather than sexual appeal.

Additionally, existing literature on the intersection of gaming and masculinities highlights hegemonic, toxic, and misogynistic gaming cultures characterised by white dominance (Salter and Blodgett 2017). In contrast, Vietnamese masculinity is shaped by local norms, Confucian values, and Western masculinities with a long history of war and colonisation. This complexity in gender relations has led to both the reinforcement of gender inequalities (Rydström 2022) and shifting gender roles (Hoang and Yeoh 2011), demonstrating how masculinity is continuously adapted and negotiated. This, therefore, triangulates a performative framework for platform-based work of game livestreamers to extend the largely existing femininised affective labour to masculine domains of game livestreaming, reframing social expectations of gender roles and digital labour. Particularly, this paper explores how game streamers

navigate and embody masculinity in response to shifting cultural and platform dynamics.

METHODS

This paper employs digital ethnographic methods (Pink et al. 2016) to observe archived streams of Vietnamese game streamers on YouTube and Facebook. In each streamers' channel, I will watch two videos, one of the most viewed and one of the most recent until March 2025. This is to explore whether their work strategies, masculine performances, and representations have been changed as they engage in affective labour while embracing informal and precarious working conditions. Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) will be used to generate emergent themes related to masculinities, labour, and platforms. The section below presents preliminary findings from online observations of 20 livestreams.

PERFORMATIVE AUTHENTICITY IN VIETNAMESE GAME STREAMING

Findings show that Vietnamese streamers update their livestream background as their career grow and viewers can assume their "status". To elaborate, lower-status game streamers tend to make their background as simple as it is, showing their "real" authenticity. As their income improves, however, they often represent their rooms like a techno space, showing an "upgraded" authenticity. So, their performances of authenticity do not fix in any contexts, but performatively changed to negotiate with the platforms, audience expectations but still signal success. Working from the bedroom is associated with domestic labour—often feminised and undervalued in traditional work structures. What these streamers do are redefining social expectations by transforming domestic spaces into sites of visible, profitable, and socially recognised labour, thereby challenging conventional gendered divisions of work.

One practice that they remain unchanged is their performance styles. They use profanity, are chatty, talk loudly in a casual manner, and make jokes. This is because they want to be as real as they are, which maintains their online personas from their early days. More prominently, Vietnamese game streamers form and work in teams, sharing similar performance styles, background setups, and audiences. This reflects the concept of algorithmic gossip to optimise the creators' visibility (Bishop 2019). However, it occurs more frequently among game creators with higher status, and therefore, potentially marginalises those who work individually. By embracing a laid-back and casual approach, these game creators seemingly challenge the conventional norms of masculinity that is tough and emotional restraints.

Overall, this paper argues that Vietnamese game streamers complicate existing discussions on authenticity and masculinity in livestreaming by shifting the focus to Southeast Asia. Their practices of performative authenticity highlight how authenticity is locally adapted in contexts where informality, precarity, and communal collaboration shape platformed livelihoods.

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BIO

Nguyen Do Doan Hanh is a PhD Candidate at the Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology. She researches livestreaming culture in Vietnam, with a particular focus on the practices of game livestreamers in the intersections of affective labor and masculinity. Her previous publication is featured in *Social Media + Society*.