

“We’re Friendly... Not Your Friends”: Balancing Brand Management and Authenticity in Gaming Podcasts

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Keywords

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INTRODUCTION

Gaming media is increasingly centred on the personalities involved (Ruberg & Lark, 2021; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). From the rise of Twitch streamers and YouTube creators, to the myriad of voices present in gaming podcasts, the transition from the traditional access journalism¹ that dominated the sphere to a more fragmented ecosystem is well underway (Stanton & Johnson, 2024). This transition provides many opportunities for creators in this space, but it also raises many notable challenges. In particular, previous research has shown that working independently in the sphere leads to challenges in regards to funding; many creators are directly reliant on continued financial support from their audience as the main revenue source (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). This presents a challenge for these creators, who must balance a potentially parasocial audience relationship with their desire to set clear personal boundaries between their work life and their personal life (Johnson, 2021). This can become even more complicated when creators also need to balance the expectations and desires of other stakeholders including advertisers or corporate partners they are collaborating with.

This paper argues that as part of this challenge, creators are forced to turn themselves into a brand; success and failure are often predicated on their ability to sell their personality and perspective as one which is appealing to the audiences they hope to court. This further exasperates the challenges that come with audience engagement, as audiences have specific expectations regarding the “brand” that creators have cultivated, and crave a certain level of authenticity from creators, even if they are capable of acknowledging that this authenticity is artificially created as part of the creators persona or “brand”. As a result, creators face a challenge can arise between the creator’s need to balance an authentic brand and maintain personal boundaries. It is this challenge which this paper is predominantly focused on examining and explaining

To do so, it looks draws on interviews with over two dozen creators and surveys of 1,800 audience member to shed light on the differing strategies employed by these creators to navigate these tensions, as well as showcasing how the audience responds to these strategies. Three strategies emerged as common practices which creators used to manage these challenges: explicit boundary setting, monetising interaction, and “leaning in” – exaggerating the audience/creator relationship to a humorous

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degree. Each of these strategies is useful in different scenarios, and this presentation will outline the benefits and challenges associated with their uses. Particular attention will be given to comparing two case studies – *The MinnMax Podcast* and *Thumb Cramps*. While *MinnMax* provides a clear blueprint for how creators use boundary setting and monetisation to manage audience relationships, *Thumb Cramps* provides an extremely clear example of using humour to maintain a perception of authenticity and mask the monetary motivators which led to the show's creation.

Previous scholars have emphasised the variety of off-camera and affective forms of labour which gaming media personalities engage with on platforms like Twitch, as well as the role that humour plays in creating a clear sense of community in the audiences of these creators. This presentation expands on this work, positioning the variety of methods of brand management showcased here as yet another aspect of the labour involved in this work and showcasing how these aspects of digital labour are also applicable to forms of gaming media beyond streaming through the case of gaming podcasts.

BIO

Dr Ryan Stanton is a sessional academic at the University of Sydney. His dissertation presented the first academic analysis of gaming podcasts, providing important insights into how creators and audiences engage with these podcasts, and how they are representative of a shift in how gaming media is produced. His work has been published in numerous journals including *Games and Culture* and he has presented on his findings at leading communications conferences including the *International Communications Association* conference in 2024.

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ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

ENDNOTES

¹ A form of journalism in which journalists are more focused on maintaining a good relationship with their sources for continued exclusive stories rather than providing investigative reporting on them.

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