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(T)witch Hunting: A Crusade Against Women and Femininity in the Digital Age

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(T)witch Hunting: A Crusade Against Women and Femininity in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The digital world is an integral part of everyday life regarded as an extension of the self and the physical world. The advent of live video streaming services offers a more interactive form of social media than existing photo and video sharing platforms, like Facebook or Instagram. Twitch, a social video streaming service where people watch live broadcasts of video game play and other various forms of creative content, has contributed to the creation and growth of online communities where variations and similarities between online and offline self are made visible. Early research, specifically concerned with cyberbullying, identifies age, gender, and ethnicity as the three major and most “inconsistent” predictors of harassment behavior (Wright 2016). Current research suggests that, as inequality persists, digital media significantly affects how gender and sexuality are (re)constructed and deconstructed both online and off. Online, women are disproportionately oppressed/penalized/bound by expectations of moderated and acknowledged femininity intended for minimizing marginalization and threats of violence in a White, heteronormative male-dominated Internet. Witch hunting on Twitch has taken the form of complaints about female content creators employing adult webcam modeling tactics on streaming platforms via chat comments or private messages on Twitch, as well as on Twitter, YouTube, etc. I introduce the concept of digital witch hunting to argue that a new generation of witch hunts has imposed a hierarchy of dominant femininities onto women to delegitimize their digital embodiment, police gender boundaries and exclude/inhibit women from fully participating and competing with men. Using a combination of interface and discourse analysis, this paper examines both the gender and sexuality discourse of Twitch, and the cultural practices and beliefs of Twitch users to identify how and why gender is a consistent factor in predicting people’s involvement in harassment and witch hunting online.

Introduction

On a dark and stormy night, the townsmen gathered in the town hall to discuss the evil that threatened them and their existence. It is an ancient evil that epitomizes chthonic forces and forbidden power. For months, the townsmen have bemoaned the loss of business, status, and manliness, urging those in power to help them. In their frustration, some have taken matters into their own hands; armed with a verbal torch, they search for evidence to support claims of suffering deception, seduction, and impotence. To combat this evil, the powers that be decided to amend and update the laws to better suit the type of strong, clear, and consistent enforcement necessary in this new age. The date is February eighth, the year is 2018, and the “threat” is feminine.

While the intentions may have been noble, and the witch-hunting era may have officially ended, witch hunting on Twitch¹ has taken the form of complaints about female content creators employing adult webcam modeling tactics on streaming platforms via chat comments or private messages on Twitch, as well as on Twitter, YouTube, etc. I introduce the concept of digital witch hunting to explain why and how men scapegoat women for their social and economic ills as part of their crusade against female sexual independence in the digital age (Solleé 2017). So, the crusade against women and femininity in the digital age continues, with women who are content creators as the targets of the never-ending hunt to “discipline and punish” female bodies both online and off (Foucault 1977; Kreps 2009). At the height of the “worldwide scandal” in 2014, #GamerGate² became a culture war between men who identified as “gamers” and the women who they viewed as fake, like Zoe Quinn, who became the target of mass vitriol and harassment after accusations of sleeping with reporters to generate positive coverage of her text-based game *Depression Quest*, and sleeping with reporters to protect herself from negative coverage (Kidd and Turner 2016). A Google search for the “fake gamer girl,” who uses her femininity and sexuality to increase her success, yields approximately 2.73 million results ranging from Complex Magazine’s “10 Signs Your Girlfriend is a Fake Gamer,” to an article titled “Fake’

¹ Twitch is video broadcasting social network where people connect with each other through a passion for video games and nerd culture (Twitch 2018).

² The hashtag for GamerGate was created to bring mainstream attention to gaming culture and renewed attention to gender disparities across cultural genres (Kidd and Turner 2016)

Gamer/Nerd Girls and Why Geek Shaming Needs to Stop” (Amirkhani 2012; Flatley 2013). Expanding the search to “fake gamer girl twitch” yields an additional 110 thousand results, the first ten of which includes Kaceytron’s Twitch profile (Twitch 2017). Kaceytron is a professional female gamer and streamer who has been playing online/video games from a very young age and is well-known for playing at a competitive level. However, Kaceytron has been targeted as a “fake gamer girl” because of her logo’s not-so-subtle homage to Pornhub, “The World’s Best HD Porn Site,” and her supposedly prominent display of cleavage on stream (Flatley 2013). While the online harassment of marginalized groups is nothing new, the increasing popularity of video streaming platforms like Twitch has bred new ground for the same old witch hunts. In the disclaimer for a 2017 video entitled “The Cam Girl Invasion of Twitch,” Glink, the creator of the video states:

“the intention of this video was NEVER to start a witch hunt or to target specific female streamers...This is not a witch hunt, this is not about targeting or harassing streamers as I CLEARLY point out in the video, the main issue here is twitch’s handling of the rules and regulations on their site...this isn’t a witch hunt, these are just people who are by-products of their environment...there’s nothing wrong with having a Patreon or Snapchat or cosplay goals in principle, but it can alter the identity of the site if the rules are too lenient” (YouTube 2017).

The digital world is an integral part of everyday life regarded as an extension of the self and the physical world. The advent of live video streaming services offers a more interactive form of social media than existing photo and video sharing platforms, like Facebook or Instagram. Twitch, a social video streaming service where people watch live broadcasts of video game play and other various forms of creative content, has contributed to the creation and growth of online communities where variations and similarities between online and offline self, the personal and the public, working conditions, and cultural production in digital media become visible. Digital communities are reflections of offline society, which makes the distinction between defining “real” offline environments and “digital” online environments misleading

because the participation in both are connected and dependent on one another (Embrick et al 2012). There is a need to examine how people use content creation to promote distinct images of sex and gender because we live in a very visual culture, which has increasingly integrated with digital media and become a means of social, political, and economic subsistence. In this thesis, I interrogate digital media and how it illustrates the reconfiguration of sites, contexts, cultural practices and social meanings of gender and sexuality through content creation (Nayar 2017). By drawing attention to the relationships between dualisms like public & private, professional & amateur, commercial & authentic, and male & female, I ask two questions: First, how effectively does gender predict harassment and witch hunting? Early research, specifically concerned with cyberbullying, identifies age, gender, and ethnicity as the three major and most “inconsistent” predictors of harassment behavior (Wright 2016). By analyzing the form and function of harassment behavior online, this thesis challenges the notion of gender as inconsistent by examining how gender contributes to participation in and being a victim of harassment behavior. Second, how do harassment behaviors affect and become effected by the gendered discourse of content creation? Recent scholarship has pointed to how dominant images are reflected in all organizational structures, interactions, and individual identities and practices both on and offline (Hamilton et al. 2018). Additionally, this scholarship argues that femininity itself is a site of domination requiring investigation to determine how dominant images affect women’s responses to harassment regarding the authenticity of their identities, and their agency in accessing economic and social benefits (Hamilton et al. 2018).

While some studies argue that gender, age, and ethnicity are inconsistent predictors of involvement in harassment online for both victims and perpetrators, others suggest that gendered and sexual hierarchies play a significant role in individuals experiences of harassment offline,

particularly among boys (Pascoe 2007; Wright 2016). Additionally, some scholars argue that digital worlds should be examined as self-contained utopias where equality flourishes and differences in identity categories dissolve because of the disembodied nature of electronic communication (Fernandez; Solleé 2017). Understanding that in real life (IRL) boundaries become more porous online, I attempt to resolve these inconsistencies in the literature by examining how women challenge the discourse of masculine domination that hinders female bodily autonomy, through content creation. I argue that this new generation of witch hunts has imposed a hierarchy of dominant femininities onto women to delegitimize their digital embodiment by forcing them to acknowledge their identity or face the threat of marginalization and violence.

To answer these questions, I must first introduce my field site: Twitch. Then, I discuss some of the key literature on harassment behaviors such as bullying, trolling, and slut-shaming, followed by a discussion of the relationship between masculinity and misogyny, and between femininity, agency, and authenticity. To explain how harassment behavior effects and is affected by the gendered discourse of content creation, I use two theories on gendered/sexual hierarchies: hegemonic masculinity and dominant femininities.

Field Site Introduction



Figure 1 - Schematic representation of Twitch's broadcast page (Recktenwald 2017)

Twitch is a social network where people can connect with others who share a love for video games (K 2017). Founded in 2011 after its predecessor, Justin.tv, “Twitch is more than a spectator experience; it is social video that relies on audio and chat to enable streamers and their audiences to interact in real-time about everything from gaming to pop culture to life in general” (Twitch 2018). Since then, Twitch has grown to become one of the most reputable, and profitable, social video streaming services and communities for not just video game culture, but an array of emerging content driven by its users who enjoy watching and interacting with people who are highly skilled and/or entertaining (Twitch 2018). Streaming is predominantly driven by the appeal of a social network centered around a shared interest in games and creative projects (Twitch 2018). With over 15 million daily active users, many of Twitch’s over 2 million unique content creators make a living solely based on how they entertain and interact with viewers on Twitch, who watch an average of 106 minutes per day, while others need to supplement their streaming activities with income from other digital media (Twitch 2018).

On any given day, users can choose from a wide swath of content to watch, including standard game play, user generated programming like competitive gaming and esports, video game publisher and developer streams, and event coverage like conventions, panels, press conferences, and show floor activities. Recently, Twitch has expanded the types of content available to include areas of interest beyond gaming. Twitch now features a creative category, which launched in 2015 and was inspired by gamers doing game-related fan art and cosplay; programmatic TV like the Bob Ross Joys of Painting marathon that celebrated the launch of the creative category; social eating; and IRL or “in real life,” which launched in 2016 after being the most requested new content category on Twitch and includes everything from vlogging (video blogging) to anime, fitness, etc. Each category is differentiated from the others by its content,

and every channel within a category is differentiated from another by the content creator and its viewers.

Users on Twitch can be categorized as viewer and/or streamer, with categories like Moderator, Affiliate, and Partner in between. Viewers who tune in to a content creator's Twitch stream and may choose to support their favorite streamers by subscribing to their channels for a minimum of \$5 per month, of which the streamer pockets \$3.50. Moderators (mods) fall into a special category in-between streamers and subs because they help the streamer manage their channel by regulating all the viewers to make sure they are following the streamer and Twitch's established guidelines, but mods can also participate in conversations, cheering, and subscribing just like everyone else. Mods are typically people who are close to the streamer in real life or have been regulars of the channel since its inception or are computer-generated digital assistants like Apple's Siri or Amazon's Alexa, except without a voice feature, that can be programmed to perform whatever functions the streamer deems necessary. This can include preventing people from posting links, censoring people's messages if they violate the chat rules, operating polls and raffles, and banning people from the channel.

A "typical" Twitch streamer is a gamer who shares their play experience with their online following. Twitch Affiliates are required to have a minimum of 500 total minutes of broadcast time in the last 30 days, 7 unique broadcast days in the last 30 days, 3 concurrent viewers or more over the last 30 days on average, and 50 followers. Twitch Partners on the other hand, are required to have a much larger average concurrent viewership and a strong community of subscribers. Twitch Partners are expected to stream frequently as per a schedule of at least three days per week, and to produce content that is interesting, will bring viewers to the channel, retain that viewership, and drive revenue. The Twitch community is assumed to be dominated by

certain demographics who believe themselves to be representative as members of the video gaming community, thus prompting discrimination and harassment of others as a means of protecting their community. Recent research based on a random sample of 2500 channels found that less than 20% of all streamers are women, and less than 10% of the top 500 most followed channels are female, demonstrating that men represent more of the content creation population than women (Infogram 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Bullying, Trolling, Slut-Shaming:

Millions of people utilize digital media every day because it offers many conveniences, including the ability to watch and play online games (Wright 2016). However, scholars contend that the Internet is a powerful and expanding tool used for the spreading harassment, marginalization, and violence (Rosewarne 2016). Different types of harassment like (cyber)bullying, trolling, and slut-shaming have all begun to receive increased attention from both researchers and the general public (Wright 2016). Bullying is a powerful social practice and process used by both boys and girls to police and produce meanings about how gender should and should not be “done” (Miller 2016; Pascoe 2007; West and Zimmerman 1987). Bullying often reflects the dominant and negative cultural narratives about women’s sexuality and serve to shape and constrain women’s sexual subjectivity, how they experience themselves as sexual beings, and their ability to make choices regarding their sexual safety, pleasure, and agency (Miller 2016). For boys, bullying typically includes homophobic and misogynistic verbal abuse as mechanism for the collective construction and regulation of masculine gender identities, while girls predominantly engage in slut slander, or slut-shaming, to mediate feminine sexuality (Miller 2016). Similar to the term “fag” among boys, the term “slut” allows women to claim their own femininities as normative

by rejecting other women's sexual deviance (Miller 2016; Pascoe 2007). Every ten seconds, someone calls a woman a "slut" or a "whore" on Twitter, which means every ten seconds, a woman is made a victim of slut-shaming or is judged based on either real or perceived sexual expressions (Barstow 1994; Dewey 2016; Duggan 2014; Sollée 2017).

Today, being a slut does not require being a sex worker, a nude photo taker, or a promiscuous woman. Any woman can be deemed a slut, though some explicit or erotic actions will expedite the process of slut-shaming, meaning the only rule for being a slut is being female (Valenti 2014; Sollée 2017). The critical difference between being a "slut" and a "player" exposes the double standard where men are rewarded for their sexual activity while women are punished for theirs (Sollée 2017). Slut-shaming is the gendered, sexualized, racialized, and classed practice of claiming women cannot effectively perform (hetero)normative femininity if they openly express their sexuality and are desired by men, which contributes to a "dilemma of desire" and puts women at greater risk of violence because men view them as "public sexual property" deserving of violence (Miller and Schwartz 1995; Miller 2016). A side effect of slut-shaming, and additional mechanism that helps to reinforce masculine dominance/gender inequality, is the constructed narrative of "pariah femininities" like sluts and lesbians as competition, or the "US v THEM mentality" of an internalized misogyny that suppresses women's interests and constitutes harassment as a form of social currency that is increasingly being traded in digital spaces (Miller 2016).

Within "networked publics," like the online streaming community, computer-aided harassment behavior like cyberbullying and slut-shaming are more virulent because of the potential for harassment to be searched, replicated, and made visible to invisible audiences (Miller 2016; Rosewarne 2016). Defined as an extension of traditional bullying, cyberbullying is

considered an indirect form of bullying predicated on the imbalance of power between the bully and victim. It involves intentionally harassing, embarrassing, and intimidating others utilizing digital media, where the opportunity to remain anonymous enables perpetrators to harass victims practically without consequence (Wright 2016). Similarly, trolling is form of harassment native to digital spaces and characterized by the coordinated participation of numerous people, almost always men, and very sexually aggressive, gender-based insults including the widespread use of pejorative terms like “whore” and “slut” to insult and humiliate women based on their physical appearance and sexuality in response to women speaking out about some form of sexism, and in ways that men don’t experience (Mantilla 2013).

Cyberbullying, gendertrolling, and slut-shaming behaviors include sending harassing messages, social exclusion, stealing someone’s identity or personal information and sharing it, spreading rumors, trying to harm someone, and the creation of defamatory websites (Wright 2016). This behavior is used by both girls and boys because it helps them define their own identities and sexualities as normative, particularly for boys, who can and must define their own sexual selves in relation to the “ever-fluctuating boundary of what is ‘normal’” (Hamilton et al. 2018; Miller 2016). In the case of “How You Bully a Girl,” homophobic and misogynistic verbal abuse are the most common mechanisms used by boys to collectively construct and regulate masculinity, while girls’ bullying reinforces traditional gender norms and limits sexuality information through sexual drama (Miller 2016).

Much of this previous research has focused on adolescents rather than addressing how adults use and are abused by harassment behavior, as well as a focus on the frequency of cyberbullying and found that the three major and most “inconsistent” predictors of cyberbullying are age, gender, and ethnicity but have not accounted for the amount of time and number of

technologies used by their participants (Wright 2016). While harassment in the form of sexual drama and slut-shaming may be considered a “girl thing,” harassment is also institutionally linked to and made more potent by the structural barriers and context of the men and women who engage in and are victimized by it (Miller 2016). Participation in online communities, like those found on Twitch, has a notable impact on involvement in online harassment. Cyber-victims report higher levels of social media and online gaming usage compared to non-victims, so analyzing the structure of platforms like Twitch and Twitter is critical to understanding how and why harassment continues to be allowed as a means of patrolling gender boundaries and ensuring that women are kept from fully occupying professional environments and play subservient roles in male dominated arenas (Mantilla 2013; Wright 2016). Much of the damage done by harassment is done to women, so in addition to analyzing the internet’s ability to disseminate misogyny and turn women into sex objects in part of the internet disconnected from sex, this paper acknowledges women’s role in the reinforcement of the “dilemma of desire” as a crucial aspect of the relationship between gender, behavior, and technology in the digital age of witch hunting (Miller 2016; Rosewarne 2016).

Masculinity and Misogyny:

Anita Sarkessian, a media critic who started a campaign on Kickstarter to fund a project highlighting sexist representations of women in the gaming community was met with threats of rape, violence, sexual assault, and death from online gamers consistently argues that the underlying motive for such harassment is the maintenance of the online milieu as a male-dominated space (Mantilla 2013). Historically, video gaming and digital space has always been a highly gendered, raced, and classed space stereotypically dominated by white, upper-class men despite research which has proven that equal numbers of men and women play video games, but men are twice as likely to identify themselves as gamers (Duggan 2015; Kidd and Turner 2016). Today, the online

culture that formed around the once reviled masculinity of geeks and nerds has been redefined as part of a masculinity that enacts hegemonic values through digital strength, skill, violence, and the domination of both women and men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Kidd and Turner 2016). Masculinities are multiple and hierarchically ordered, and at its core, video game cultures embody a form of resistant and reactionary masculinity that simultaneously rejects the dominant “real-world” hegemonic masculinity while recreating it in a new environment (Hamilton et al. 2018; Kidd and Turner 2016). Originally proposed in discussion of making masculinities and the experience of men’s bodies, hegemonic masculinity has been defined as the patterns and practices of masculinities that legitimate men’s dominance over women, and is achieved through cultural ascendancy, coercion, violence, and unequal gender relations (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Hamilton et al. 2018; Messerschmidt 2016). However, hegemonic masculinities are not always the most common or the most powerful despite being used to construct overly simple, static, and reified typologies (Pascoe 2007). Video game culture has reframed the qualities of “geeks” and “nerds” as a positive, dominant masculinity while remaining complicit in a violent hegemonic masculinity that subordinates women through a misogynistic dialogue that perpetuates the absence of women (Hamilton et al. 2018; Kidd and Turner 2016; Messerschmidt 2016; Rosewarne 2016).

The hegemonic masculinity of digital and technological worlds leaves little space for women in gaming and gaming communities, which create spaces of power where, through games, men can explore the possibility of exerting power over systems of gender, race, and sexuality that they feel are threatening to their relationship to society and their relationship to the activity they love (Kidd and Turner 2016). Masculinity can be understood as constructed through assumptions related to technological skills and competence, which is subsequently a construction of gendered identity. In this dynamic, women lack technological competence because they seek to

appropriately perform femininity and men are technologically competent by virtue of their performance of masculinity (Jenson & de Castell; Kidd and Turner 2016). The “Gamergate” controversy in 2014 was emblematic of the misogyny that runs rampant throughout gaming culture, and many other online communities, because of women’s supposed encroachment on gaming culture (Kidd and Turner 2016; Rosewarne 2016). The assumption of male dominated online arenas has created an environment where misogynistic comments are made because women are liable to “feminize” the space (Rosewarne 2016). Whether male or female, participating in video gaming is a performance of masculinity because it is culturally associated with the masculine. As a result, women’s presence in video game culture is continuously framed as “not gaming” through the creation of the hardcore/casual dichotomy, which associates casual, non-competitive gaming with femininity and “hardcore” gaming with masculinity (Kendall and Cote; Kidd and Turner 2016; Rosewarne 2016; Vanderhoef). By trying to exclude casual “feminine” gaming as different and less important than “masculine” gaming, casual gaming and gameplay that doesn’t fit the hegemonic masculine ideal has been legitimized through profitability via streaming revenue (Kidd and Turner 2016). My research shows that as women establish themselves within traditionally male “hardcore” gaming spaces, they challenge the beliefs about their abilities and practices within the industry that contribute to their marginalization and mistreatment (Kidd and Turner 2016).

Gender receives particular attention as a predictor of online harassment because boys are more often engaged in cyberbullying as aggressors than girls (Wright 2016). Gender differences in cyberbullying are also predicated on the type of technology used and the types of behaviors involved, with boys being more likely to engage in cyberbullying through online games and girls being more likely to be victims (Dehue et al; Kidd and Turner 2016; Popovic-Citic et al; Wright

2016). More specifically, boys engage in and are victimized by verbal aggression via online games while girls perpetuate and are victimized by relational and verbal aggression through networking sites and online games (Wright 2016). The world of gaming is heavily intertwined with the world of social media and the internet, which has created a culture in both places that that is rampant with bullying and threats (Kidd and Turner 2016). Negative experiences, like rejection by both male and female peers, can trigger negative emotions that can be alleviated by cyberbullying (Kidd and Turner 2016; Sevcikova et al; Wright et al. 2010). The subsequent cyberbullying perpetrated by both men and women includes accusing women of being able to “play people” better than men, pretending to be innocent, being “all flirty and snobbish inside,” and cheating money out of men, grounding the objectification and demonization of women as sluts online in men’s feelings of rejection and resentment (Rosewarne 2016). My research aims to explain variations in online harassment rates by examining how, similar to women, men on Twitch feel threatened by the idea of women being paid for their femininity and sexuality, and the rejection and resentment experienced by male streamers who claim they are losing viewers as a result increases the relationship between the cyber victimization of women and cyberbullying perpetration by men.

Femininity and Agency:

Theoretical approaches that depict women as solely disadvantaged by gender limit our understanding of how women can gain power by enacting rather than resisting different femininities at different times and in different contexts (Hamilton et al. 2018). Some gender scholars, who describe gender as a social construction produced through interaction and reinforced through institutions and socializations, treat femininities as necessarily disempowered and passively enacted by women, a phenomenon best explained by Patricia Hill Collins’ “matrix of domination,” or the interlocking systems of oppression and social inequality that support and

reinforce each other (Hamilton et al. 2018). Gender is viewed as relational, with women and men defined against each other through performances of gender that produce mutually exclusive binary categories. These performances of gender correspond to heterosexual sexual desire and appear natural and inevitable to the point of obscuring how performances of gender police the self and others (Hamilton et al. 2018). By focusing on gender specifically, this literature views women as oppressed without acknowledging their capacity to become oppressors themselves (Hamilton et al. 2018).

Intersectionality provides a useful lens for thinking about the particular masculinity and femininity of gamer culture because it allows us to recognize men as privileged by their gender, race, class, and sexuality even if men do not feel privileged by their relationship to the economic and occupational system (Kidd and Turner 2016). Dominating images of womanhood are cultural ideals of womanhood that are instantiated in bodies, identities, ideologies, and practices, to control the dominant femininities within a particular context and justify the relative status of some women over other women, and some men (Hamilton et al. 2018). Performances of dominant femininities are motivated by the pursuit of a “femininity premium,” a set of benefits that accrue to those who can approximate dominant femininities, which depends on an individual’s location in race, class, nationality, ability, age, and other aspects of the matrix of domination (Hamilton et al. 2018). Like dominant masculinities, dominant femininities command and control specific intersections and exercises of power, so my research sheds light on women’s agency in navigating femininity and recognizing the benefits they might accrue from different gender performances (Hamilton et al. 2018).

Some scholars maintain that there is no femininity that is hegemonic in the same way that masculinity is hegemonic, and the form of femininity most valued, by men, is defined by

compliance with subordination and oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men (Connell 1987; Hamilton et al. 2018). Although women who question the patriarchal structure of society and raise their voices are typically met with sexualized harassment, the digital landscape is changing, and women are increasingly profiting from their sexualization rather than exclusively being victims of it (Rosewarne 2016). Like men, women also try to optimize status across systems within the matrix of domination, even at the expense of others, which is why there is literature to suggest that some women, particularly affluent, white, heterosexual women, play the “gatekeeper” role in regard to sexuality because they are more likely to have the opportunity to accept or reject men’s advances (Hamilton et al. 2018; Rosewarne 2016). In achieving dominant femininities, women accrue different amount of “gender capital,” or the knowledge, resources, and aspects of identity available - within a given context - that permit access to specific gendered identities as social currency to be leveraged for advantage over other women, and some men (Bridges 2009; Hamilton et al. 2018). In keeping with Schippers’ (2007) notion that femininities are multiple and hierarchical, this paper argues that materiality matters and is deterministic of the agency of women in navigating gender and the benefits of embodying “hegemonic femininity” (Hamilton et al. 2018).

“The cult of true womanhood” is characterized by piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, as well as erotic appeal to white heterosexual men (Collins 1990; Hamilton et al. 2018). The implication that women who invest in femininities are “cultural dopes” who lack agency by complying with men’s interests rather than rejecting emphasized femininity is being challenged through the mix of desire and fear of female sexuality embodied by the “slut,” the bad witch of the twenty-first century (Sollée 2017). The slut is a sexually liberated woman who completely owns herself, loves her body, and gives herself permission to express and actualize her

desire however she chooses (Korvette 2016); the slut transcends sexual rules (Korvette 2015); the slut “pulls patriarchy out of her ass and owns her sexuality without getting arrested or institutionalized” (Korvette 2013); the slut is creative, brave, honest, loves herself and others enough to deconstruct desire, and refuses to be limited or shamed by people committed to misunderstanding her (Korvette 2015); and the slut accepts that she cannot please everyone all the time and should not try to (Sollée 2017). However, the slut is also subjected to structural and discursive constraints and push-back that recreate it as a site of domination. Recognizing this tension between empowerment and disempowerment, my research will examine how women draw on controlling images of femininity to combat the “patriarchal bargain,” which assumes women conform to patriarchy as means of accessing economic, social, and other individual benefits while reinforcing their subordinate position (Hamilton et al. 2018).

Data and Methods

For my data collection, I began my short-term digital ethnography by identifying some of the Twitch streamers I was already familiar with as a casual viewer to begin my participant observation, which took place over the course of six months from October 2017 to March 2018. When a streamer I was following on Twitch went live, I would be notified via email containing a link to their channel and a brief description of what was being broadcast. While watching, I occasionally participated in chat and, using a multi-column transcription scheme, recorded the content creator’s spoken language and embodied conduct, the audience’s written chat messages, and an annotation of the on-screen content as accurately as possible (Recktenwald 2017). The use of short-term ethnographic methods in this research allowed for the demarginalization of respondent’s voices through both visible and invisible observation of social interactions and structures (Murthy 2008). Short-term ethnographic studies are particularly well-suited for calling

attention to disruptions in the relationship between work and success by analyzing the distinct positions of both men and women, and/or changes to the structure of spatial relationships and uses (Murthy 2008). While the inherently covert nature of digital ethnography does raise some ethical concerns regarding issues of consent in digital space and privacy because the presence of the ethnographer in digital space is almost invisible, Twitch streams are publicly available sources, so they are fair game for quoting, and I made my presence known to both streamers and viewers whenever it did not hinder data collection (Kidd and Turner 2016; Murthy 2008).

In addition, I used NVivo's capture feature to import the Twitter profiles of the content creators I observed, and users who responded to or mentioned them, from October 2017 to March 2018 because social networking sites provide unique and in-depth autobiographical accounts of communities and respondents when considered alongside other data (Murthy 2008). Once all of the tweets were compiled, I ran coding queries for keywords such as "witch, hunt" and "slut" in order to pinpoint examples of and references to who was engaging in the harassment of female content creators, what forms of harassment were being used, and how harassment was being responded to. Other terms that emerged during my NVivo analysis included the use of "fake," "titty," and "boob" to describe female streamers accused of using their bodies and sexuality to generate viewership, "neckbeard"³ and "incel"⁴ to describe the men most enraged by the popularity of female streamers on Twitch, and "ToS" in reference to the terms of service and community guidelines on Twitch. By combining these two sources of data in my analysis, I argue that sexism, slut-shaming, and misogyny are clearly defined activities, behaviors, and beliefs for those perpetrating, abstaining from, and being subjected to harassment behavior.

³ Neckbeard is a pejorative term used to describe overweight male internet users (Rosewarne 2016)

⁴ Incel: involuntarily celibate

For my analysis, I employed Andre Brock's critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) because it is designed to be open to any critical cultural theoretical framework, so long as it is applied to both the structure of a digital media interface and the discourse of its users. CTDA is best suited to examining digitally mediated discourse, structure, meaning, interaction, and cultural/social behavior (Brock 2016). As a methodological framework, CTDA provides a critical cultural approach to interrogating the complexities of digital media technologies framed by the cultural and social practices its users subscribe to offline (Brock 2016). Technology is typically seen as separate from a person's being and society's character, and as a result, social science research has been more concerned with what people do online rather than why people do things online (Wright et al. 2010). My thesis draws on CTDA to examine how men and women perceive, articulate, and define the technocultural space and themselves in response to how they use different media (Brock 2016).

Multimodality, or the description of discursive practices through different modes of communication, is integral to CTDA because it mirrors a digital artifact's simultaneity as a structure, service, platform, object, subject, and discourse more effectively than a mixed-methods approach (Brock 2016). CTDA focuses on artifacts, practices, and beliefs in its empirical analysis through the integration of interface analysis and critical discourse analysis (Brock 2016). Interface analysis focuses on analyzing the "speed, size, and character of technology" from a critical cultural perspective by including the material, economic, historical, and cultural factors that contribute to the design and use of a digital media artifact to convey meaning (Brock 2016). I conducted an interface analysis of Twitch as a digital media artifact to unpack what the platform is designed to do and how users express themselves through the platform based on the rules and resources built into the platform. Discourse analysis satisfies the need for digital media

researchers to examine both the practices and beliefs generated by users, and the artifact through which their practices and beliefs are mediated (Brock 2016). By being critical of both the content people create as they use Twitch and the ways Twitch regulates their content through its terms of service and community guidelines, I engaged in a discourse analysis of how users police each other to maintain their beliefs regarding the appropriate use of the platform (Brock 2016).

Findings

Using hegemonic masculinity, misogyny, and dominant femininity as theoretical frameworks in CTDA to illuminate harassment in both the interface and discourse of Twitch, I have found that participation in and being a victim of witch hunting draws from offline understandings of masculinity, femininity, sexuality, bullying, and beliefs about “appropriate” technological use (Brock 2016). These theoretical frameworks allowed me to define, describe, and analyze the use of Twitch and Twitter from the perspective of those who employ it to articulate their identity, police the identities of others, and dictate the structures of online platforms (Brock 2016). Returning to the allegory of the townhall meeting at the beginning of my thesis, through my interface analysis of Twitch’s terms of service and community guidelines as the rules and regulations that structure this particular digital town, I found that there is little to no restriction on or punishment for users who engage in witch hunting. Through my discourse analysis of Twitch and Twitter, I found that those most likely to engage in harassment behavior is the townsman, or those men who believe themselves to be the protectors of the masculine social order on Twitch. The witch then, is the embodiment of the female threat and a cultural referent/discursive strategy that simultaneously empowers and disempowers women by placing the value of female content creation in authenticity.

Terms of Service: The New Malleus Maleficarum

“All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is, in women, insatiable” – *The Malleus Maleficarum*,⁵1486

Female sexuality did not play as large a role in Salem or other historic American witch hunts, but it remains the primary target of a “destructive male hegemony motivated by religious, political, and economic interests” that still persist today (Sollee 2017). Guided by sources of knowledge like *The Malleus Maleficarum*, which was a repository of anti-witch sentiments, witch hunting evolved into an understanding that female bodies and minds were seen as weaker, more corruptible, and inclined to vice (Sollee 2017). As a result, religious and government officials leveraging their positions to thwart female bodily autonomy is very much an American reality, and a repressive view of female sexuality has been infused into the American psyche (Sollee 2017). This is made evident in the language used by platforms like Twitch to structure their Terms of Service (ToS) and Community Guidelines, which operate in tandem to unintentionally create an environment ideally suited for witch hunting.

In the original Terms of Service, which had not been changed prior to February 2nd, 2018, Twitch’s policy was:

“**Dress appropriately**...Nerds are sexy, and you’re all magnificent, beautiful creatures, but **let’s try to keep this about the games**, shall we? Wearing no clothing or **sexually suggestive** clothing – including lingerie, swimsuits, pasties, and undergarments – is prohibited, as well as any full nude torsos, which applies to both male and female broadcasters...” (Twitch 2018).⁶

Though the general request to “dress appropriately” is tame enough, the list of “sexually suggestive clothing” consists entirely, albeit not exclusively, of garments worn by women (Twitch 2018). By writing these appearance restrictions directly into the structure of their

⁵ Written by Heinrich Kramer, a German Catholic friar and inquisitor, the *Malleus Maleficarum* was the first formal text used to identify witchcraft

⁶ Bold text added for emphasis

platform, Twitch established a rubric for like-minded users to ritualistically use a means of repressing female sexuality (Brock 2016). For example, in a dialogue between two viewers and a female streamer on January 18th, 2018, the first viewer stated that “Twitch is primarily a site for gaming and giving people entertainment. Twitch whores go to the website and exploit horny teens and men into getting money from them while wearing skimpy clothes...” According to this viewer, the Terms of Service were very clear regarding the purpose of Twitch and what sort of attire, and profit, is not acceptable on the platform. In response, the second viewer said to the female streamer, “...think of it like being on TV. A lot of kids probably watch, you’re supposed to set an example. Especially as a female streamer, you need to set the bar high. It’s unfair, but necessary in this world.” For the second viewer, the female streamer in question was expected to rise above the other “Twitch whores” and not sell sexualized content for individual success at the expense of the platform. This sentiment is one shared by a large group of Twitch viewers and streamers who believe “...if you want to be a streamer on Twitch, maybe try following their TOS...#StreamGamesNotBoobs. You’re allowed to wear and do whatever you want, as long as you don’t break laws and don’t violate a businesses(sic) service agreement. There are places for sexualized content too, it’s just not Twitch. Let’s stick to what we are really there for: gaming.” This particular concerned viewer alludes to other digital media platforms where sexualized content is acceptable, like Patreon⁷, Snapchat⁸, and adult webcam modeling sites like Chaturbate⁹ and MyFreeCams¹⁰ while acknowledging that streamers can express themselves how

⁷ Co-founded by musician Jack Conte and Sam Yam to help provide membership businesses for 100,000 monthly active creators for two million monthly active patrons worth \$300 million in creator earnings in 2018 (Patreon 2018)

⁸ A new kind of camera connected to over 180 million people every day all over the world (Snapchat 2018)

⁹ An adult website featuring live webcam performances by amateur camgirls, camboys and couples including nudity and sexual activities ranging from stripteases and dirty talk to masturbation with sex toys (Wikipedia 2018)

¹⁰ The largest online adult webcam network, connecting people from all over the world through high-speed live video-chat. MyFreeCams collaborates with their models as partners so they earn a larger percentage than with any other site (Wikipedia 2018).

they choose as long as it is in keeping with the rules and regulations of the platform.

As Twitch grew and expanded to include various categories like IRL and Creative, the Terms of Service and Community Guidelines had to adapt to changes in the community around what performances of femininity and sexuality were or were not acceptable now. In the updated Terms of Service, which were on March 5th, 2018, a little less than a month after the digital townhall meeting on February 8th, 2018 to address increasing harassment behavior, Twitch stated:

*“We restrict content that involves nudity or is sexual in nature, and are committed to ensuring that **Twitch is not used for sexual exploitation or violence**¹¹ ... While we understand that some nudity or sexual conduct might be intended for educational, scientific, artistic, newsworthy, or academic purposes, we restrict this content due to the diversity in age and cultural backgrounds of our global community”* (Twitch 2018).

The nudity and sexual conduct that Twitch is understanding of pertains to streaming content like cosplay¹² and bodypainting, where streamers are in violation of the original TOS’ restriction on “any full nude torsos,” male or female, as well as wearing “lingerie, swimsuits, pasties, and undergarments (Twitch 2018). Having displaced the core of their original platform structure, Twitch decided to establish a distinction between sexually explicit and sexually suggestive within their Terms of Service and Community Guidelines. According to Twitch, sexually suggestive content is reviewed for,

*“its intent and context based on a number of factors including, but not limited to: behavior and commentary; reaction to content, such as chat messages from the broadcaster, moderators, and what chat messages they permit in their community; **attire and environment, such as location and background music, props, etc.; camera framing, angle, and focus**¹³; stream attributes, such as title, intros/outros, custom thumbnail, and other metadata; profile and channel content, such as banners, profile images, emotes, and panels.”* (Twitch 2018)

¹¹ Bold text added for emphasis

¹² The practice of dressing up as a character from a movie, book, or video game, especially one from the Japanese genres of manga and anime.

¹³ Bold text added for emphasis

This definition of sexually suggestive content criteria is a call out of female content creators like Kaceytron who, though her performance is satirical, play on adult webcam modeling tropes where factors like attire, location, music, props, camera framing and angle, and profile and channel content are more prominent. Channel content like panels advertising links to other websites increasingly became a means of circumnavigating the Terms of Service and Community Guidelines by supplementing acceptable stream content with sexually suggestive and/or explicit content through platforms like Patreon and Snapchat, eventually causing Twitch to restrict linking to “lewd¹⁴” Patreons (Twitch 2018). According to one female streamer, although these changes in the structure of the platform were intended to alleviate harassment, “it’s very troublesome to me how much energy the twitch community is putting into vilifying girls who don’t conform. I understand not wanting literal porn on stream, but no linking to ‘lewd’ paterons? (sic) Seems like slut shaming to me imo¹⁵.”

In calling attention to how Twitch’s changes in structure could be construed as slut shaming, this female streamer articulated something streamers like Seriously Clara began identifying as witch hunting, particularly in a debate Seriously Clara engaged in with MetalGearMA4 on Twitter:

(1/27/18) SC (@seriouslyclara):

“People get mad at “boobie streamers” (bit.ly/2FliXWW) when other streamers are ACTUALLY scamming people (bit.ly/2FnGV3L), ENDANGERING lives on the road (bit.ly/2ngFRIG), and “pretending” (??) to drug people at parties. Awesome.”

¹⁴ A term used in the anime and gaming community to refer to things that are sexually suggest rather than sexually explicit

¹⁵ IMO: in my opinion

(1/28/18) SC: “This is probably going to catch hate. I don’t even care. People need to get their priorities straight. These PLATFORMS need to get their priorities straight. Where are we even headed? It doesn’t matter if this is ‘just the minority.’ It HAPPENS. It’s REAL.”

(1/27/18) MGMA4 (@MetalGearMA4): “If you want defend twitch’s inconsistent rules by doing a #notalltittystreamers bullshit then go right ahead. The reality is that titty streamers break rules constantly but get a pass a lot.”

(1/28/18) SC: “Are you actually putting ‘titty streamers’ at the same level of damage as those 3 examples? Get your priorities straight.”

(1/28/18) MGMA4: “is that relevant? If one type of thing happens way more often than others despite severity of damage, you don’t just ignore it”

(1/28/18) SC: “if that’s where you want to being your witch hunt, go nuts. Shows where your values are at.”

(1/28/18) MGMA4: “are you implying witch hunts are acceptable?”

(1/28/18) SC: “You’ve lost the point already.”

(1/28/18) MGMA4: “You’re obviously attacking my morals. Which is ironic because you seemed to imply that witch hunting is fine so long as it’s not titty streamers or that they’re not the first target of a witch hunt. Afterall, you never implied you don’t condone witch hunting.”

(1/28/18) SC: “This what you got out of this? You’re a classic example of fighting for the sake of fighting. One of the above examples may be breaking ToS, but the rest are breaking the law and/or endangering lives. THAT’S what this is about.”

SC's point about all the other Terms of Service and Community Guidelines violations that go unacknowledged because of the community's obsessions with vilifying "boobie streamers" is ignored by MGMA4 because he sees "titty streamers" breaking the rules and getting a pass as a much bigger threat than scamming viewers, streaming while driving, and potentially drugging unsuspecting partygoers while broadcasting because "titty streamers" happen way more often. Interestingly, SC says to MGMA4 that if "titty streamers" are where he wants to start his witch hunt, that's up to him, which MGMA4 takes to mean that SC condones witch hunting. As BijouDemi puts it, "That's Twitch's problem. Not yours. They have issues with enforcing ALL rules evenly across the board. Your. Boobie streamer witch hunt is the reason Twitch is such a toxic environment for women. It has literally NO EFFECT ON YOU. Go focus on yourself and leave people alone" This misunderstanding between SC and MGMA4 highlights one of main prerequisites of witch hunting, the fear of women who have the power to make men give them money through the magic of seduction and their ability to dismantle everything men in the Twitch community desire to protect, so men take it upon themselves to uphold what they claim is the morally right. Throughout these changes in the structure of Twitch, and the epistemology of performances of femininity and sexuality on the platform, there is ambiguity in how the public should navigate shifts in the discourse of digital media, which is why conflict between the townsmen and the witch about both the content on, and structure of, the platform results in witch hunting.

The Townsman and The Witch

The witch is both a symbol of female power and female persecution, the apotheosis of evil femininity and an emblem of female strength in the face of oppression; a magical woman, a liberated woman, and a persecuted woman; female divinity, ferocity, and transgression;

charming, bewitching, beguiling, and sexually irresistible with her mysterious feminine wiles; a woman who knows her own power and is an artist (Sollée 2017). The witch could be any and every woman fighting to liberate the witch from oppressive discourses in digital media, both factual or fictional. The townsman represents those men who, in defending digital media against feminization, are simultaneously trying to protect the most deep-rooted idea of themselves as masculine, not just within digital media but throughout society (Rosewarne 2016; Sollée 2017). Men's need to protect their masculine identity makes the contradictory combination of restraint and seduction difficult for women to achieve because they are subject to the appreciation of the men, who make unconscious/self-interested errors in interpreting the structure and discourse of digital media (Rosewarne 2016; Sollée 2017). "The same sexist narratives that suggest a woman's worth lies in her sexual desirability suggest a man's worth lies in his strength..." a strength best expressed on Twitch through success. (Sollée 2017). Within the context of digital media, male content creators are assumed to be successful, because they are masculine and therefore more naturally inclined to digital media and its functions (Rosewarne 2016). In conversation with a male viewer, openly queer female streamer AnneMunition asked:

(7/5/17) AM (@annemunition): "I wonder how many guys online are told to "get back in the kitchen" or sent hate mail because they rejected a stranger's offer of marriage."

(7/5/17) MR (@mugruith): "Almost makes me ashamed to be a dude"
(7/5/17) AM:

(7/5/17) AM: "Nah, no shame. Just be a good dude. Don't propose to a woman you don't know and then call her an ugly bitch for refusing. :)"

AM paints a vivid picture of the social identity of masculinity and how it divides the social world along gendered lines where the public domain, including digital media, is seen as male

while the private/domestic domain, like the kitchen is perceived as female. In his conversation with AM, MR specifically says he is “almost” ashamed to be a dude, which acknowledges the trap of hegemonic masculinity as permanently in contention with every other man’s attempt to assert their masculinity while simultaneously highlighting the fact that masculinity does not constrain men in the same way that the identity of the witch constrains women because men can choose not to meet the demands of manliness whereas women are forced into competing dominating images of femininity (Hamilton et al. 2018; Rosewarne 2016; Sollée 2017). This query from AM challenges the notion that the work of content creation is only legitimate if done by men because female work has been traditionally considered to have less value than work done by men (Sollée 2017).

According to another Twitch view, the act of selling one’s sexuality through the spell of seduction, which women are constantly being accused of through witch hunting, only has to be taken over by a man and performed in public to be transfigured as masculine and legitimate:

“Twitch viewer logic: Guy does work out stream = awesome. Girl does work out = slut, clickbait, whore. Guy does make up/Body paint = brave, creative, awesome. Girl make up/Body paint = whore, clickbait, etc. Guy wears Vest = proud of his body, comfortable. Girl = slut, whore, etc”

Despite this double standard, there is no “wizard hunting” as AnneMunition jokes despite one of her viewers’ claim:

(7/5/17) CN (@chad_napper):

“Then what’s with the witch hunt against men? Shouldn’t we be opposing sexist and shitty people? Why is this a gender thing at all?”

(7/6/17) AM (@AnneMunition):

“Witch hunt? Wouldn’t it be wizard hunt? Did you miss the tweet praising good guys or just choose to ignore it?”

(7/6/17) CN:

“Wizard hunt. Bahaha! I posted before you made that comment. But, it felt like good guys are the minority. Just wanted to clarify we’re not.”

(7/6/17) AM:

“Good people are usually quieter people, at least online. I’m not trying to say all guys are bad. Just commenting on specific events.”

(7/6/17) CN:

“I appreciate that and I believe you’re not a misandrist. I guess I’m just letting you know how it came across.”

A “wizard” hunt would imply that male content creators are engaging in deceptive practices similar to the “witchcraft” they accuse women of and so vehemently oppose and require the existence of a wizard identity that flew in the face of a hegemonic femininity that did not need to compete with masculinity, yet the only wizard identity that exists in digital media is one shared by users Wizardchan¹⁶, which is only a minor deviation from the hegemonically masculine identities of the “neckbeard” and the “incel” (Kidd and Turner 2016; Rosewarne 2016; Sollée 2017). In this conversation with AnneMunition, CN asks why gender is even part of the discussion about who is being “sexist and shitty,” because he personally feels like his manliness has been questioned in a type of “witch hunt against men” who aren’t being good dudes. What CN fails to acknowledge is the fact that the identity of “wizard” is not one forced onto men, so they cannot be hunted. This speaks to the fear and anxiety aroused by female sexual independence that makes men vulnerable to frantic investment in increasing their visible signs masculinity through “games” of violence and displaying their sexual or social reproductive capacity through witch hunting as a badge of honor and distinction in the public sphere of digital media (Rosewarne 2016).

The example above exemplifies the sentiment that “We, as a culture, do not take women seriously on a profound level. We do not believe women. We do not trust women. We do not like

¹⁶ A Japanese-inspired image-based online discussion board for male virgins to share their thoughts and discuss their interests and lifestyle as a virgin, typically past the age of 30 (Kidd and Turner 2016).

women,” which is why women inserting themselves and their femininity into their visual stories on Twitch as a means of staking a claim in and taking control of the narrative about the witch is seen as a challenge to the townsman’s masculinity (Hamilton et al. 2018; Rosewarne 2016; Sollée 2017). As an affront to the townsman, the identity of the witch is either taken up freely by feminine individuals seeking subversive power that does not align with dominating images of femininity to combat witch hunting, an embodiment of those who practice forms of witchcraft loosely defined by a combination of womanhood and creativity that thrives in the liminal space between fantasy and reality, or forced upon women in order to punish them and police their sexuality (Hamilton et al. 2018; Sollée 2017). In a debate with a few different viewers, female streamer BadBunny touches on the repression inherent in the dominating image of femininity on Twitch that praises smiling, being friendly, attentive, submissive, and restrained in one’s sexuality as expected and acceptable:

(1/10/17) BB (@badbunnytwitch):

“Dude praises me for not showing skin, I immediately change into a sports bra, He says “bich” & leaves (TITTY STREAMERS AREN'T THE PROBLEM)”

(1/16/18) SM (@sirmatt1011):

I don’t think you understand my point judging by how you’re asking me what’s wrong with exploiting people over twitch.”

(1/16/18) BB:

“Being a slut = exploitation?”

(1/17/18) SM:

“I don’t think you’re reading it correctly. Twitch whores, otherwise known as the sluts of twitch, use their body to get views and money from horny teens and adults. If you’re telling me they don’t, you’re clearly blind to all the videos of them online.”

(1/17/8) TP (@Twitch_Pink):

“using whores and sluts in the same sentence you clearly don’t like women very much. Fuck off LOL you literally are the meaning of an incel.”

(1/17/18) T (@tradeisland):

“It’s their only way to make money. Everything else they’ve tried in life failed.”

Again, BB is another among many women who share the notion that “titty streamers” are not the problem, the fragility of men on Twitch’s masculinity is. As TheGeekChic, a popular female streamer puts it, “if you’re gonna get bothered by girls on Twitch having boobs...what happens to you when you step into the real world?” By asking the obvious, TGC points out a fundamental flaw in the townsman’s logic: if a woman’s visible cleavage is the most offensive expression of femininity and sexuality imaginable, should they not also engage in the same witch hunting practices they employ against women on Twitch in their day to day offline encounters with women who do not conform to what they believe to be the dominating image of femininity (Hamilton et al. 2018).

There is a pervasive fiction among male Twitch users that a woman’s value is determined by her sexual purity, and women who do not accept this as “femininity premium” but instead reappropriate their body image as strong and creative appear ugly and “unfeminine” by the misogynistic standards of hegemonic masculinity in this context (Hamilton et al. 2018; Rosewarne 2016; Sollée 2017). When a woman is perceived to be influencing the success of their content creation through exploitations of femininity and sexuality, male users immediately identify them as “Twitch whores” and “the sluts of twitch” who “use their body to get views and money from horny teens and adults.” By this logic, achieving the dominating image of femininity requires women to exist in a double bind where they can be pretty, but not too pretty;

sexy, but not too sexy; entertaining and good at what they do, but not too good or entertaining lest they take attention, and legitimacy, away from men who believe they cannot compete with a woman's femininity and sexuality because they are at a biological disadvantage. However, TheManaSource rebuffs the argument of biological disadvantage that some men argue is strengthened by depictions of and being identified as "neckbeards" and "incels" in a tweet saying "Hey streamers, If you think women are stealing your views and success solely because of their boobs, I have news for you. Your stream just sucks. Think about it. By believing this, you're prepared to admit that a random pair of boobs is more entertaining than you are. RIP¹⁷." TMS very bluntly points out how flawed male Twitch users' logic is if their fear of the female body is so deep seated that they believe any and every female body is inherently more valuable than everything that goes into their content creation. However, this fear is historical and deep-seated. The witch is frightening because she is unattractive and sexually unappealing, and the witch is frightening because she is "charming, bewitching, beguiling, and sexually irresistible" (Solleé 2017). This combination of fear and desire makes female sexual independence, embodied in the identity of the witch, the townsman's biggest fear because it liberates women from the oppressive structure of dominant femininities by creating a new "femininity premium" that grants them power through authentic femininity (Hamilton et al. 2018; Solleé 2017).

I introduce authentic femininity as a concept that explains women's response to witch hunting through performances of femininity and sexuality that create a new "femininity premium" predicated on female sexual liberation. BadBunny elaborates on the notion of the witch, and the slut, as authentic femininity and sexuality by asking "what's wrong with sluts?" To which a viewer responds "NOTHING. I never said anything was wrong with them. They

¹⁷ RIP: Rest in peace

make the world go round.” Another female streamer, Austen Marie, during a different stream said “There’s no such thing as slutty. Slut or slutty is used to put women down based on some Bs culturalized standard. I have friends in the sex industry. Are they slutty? No they’re out there fuckin working.” AM makes a critical point in saying that “there is no such thing as slutty,” and this applies to women both in and out of the sex industry. Saying that “slut” and “slutty” are based on “some Bs culturalized standard” alludes to the historic naturalization of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Rosewarne 2016). Central to the discourse of witch hunting is the belief that female sexuality, separate from men, was to be feared so women who defy the sexual status quo are persecuted as witches for using their bodies to survive and thrive in a culture that has not fully granted them agency in achieving authentic femininity (Sollée 2017).

Skyhook, a former nude model for Suicide Girls¹⁸, transitioned over to Twitch with the launch of the Creative category after her retirement from modeling and described her experience on the platform with the following:

“I really love modeling but ever since streaming on Twitch, I’ve felt ashamed for having confidence to do what I want with my own body. People have made me feel as if modeling takes away my credibility from my talents as a painter and a caster. Whether it’s painting or a photoshoot, it’s a way to express myself and I’ve always loved making art. So why so much judgement over one? You cant’ be a female who is outwardly confident with herself and get respected by the majority, it’s just not the way society functions... I’ve been a nude model since I was 19...But none of the hate I get from that compares to the level of anger on twitch bc of a lil cleavage.”

According to Skyhook, the witch hunting on Twitch is worse than any harassment behavior she was subjected to while actually engaging in nude modeling, further illuminating the source of the witch hunting problem as the townsmen engaging in it rather than the women being accused of seeking agency through authentic femininity and sexuality. As side effect of slut-

¹⁸ An online community-based website that celebrates alternative pin-up girls as their idea of beauty redefined (Suicide Girls 2018).

shaming, and an additional mechanism that reinforces hegemonic masculinity in digital media, internalized misogyny explains the constructed narrative of other women as competition employed by streamers like Indiefoxx, which Skyhook identifies as an “US v THEM mentality” among women. Of course, not all men and not all women are “slut-shaming sexist pieces of shit” like BD suggests, but that does not change that fact that, as BD goes on to say, “women deserve respect no matter what they’re wearing, what they’re doing, or what they look like.”

While some women find agency in combatting the discourse of witch hunting, there are others who engage in the same harassment behavior as the townsman as a means of establishing themselves within the dominant image of femininity and achieving a “femininity premium” (Hamilton et al 2018). For example, female streamer Indiefoxx said “I’m ashamed to say **Twitch is a platform that supports lazy females selling their bodies for cash, you are teaching little girls to sell sex cuz that’s what’s popular.**¹⁹ Make them wear tshirts and pants. Compete on the same playing field as men. Feminism is equality. Spread the word.” Even though women outnumber men on every social media platform except Twitter according to 2015 data from the Pew Research Center, so they already can and are competing with them as equally as they can despite different digital media’s structural constraints, the women who support campaigns like #StreamGamesNotBoobs and quote feminism as women not selling sex on Twitch are just as guilty of scorning women by slut-shaming, or judging them based on either real or perceived performances of authentic femininity and sexuality as men are (Barstow 1994; Dewey 2016; Duggan 2014; Sollée 2017).

Some female streamers satirically critique the arguments of the townsmen through tweets like:

¹⁹ Bold text added for emphasis

- (2/11/17) KCT (@kaceytron): “BEING A SLUT DOES NOT MAKE YOU A FEMINIST IT MAKES YOU A SLUT! Modern feminism is basically celebrating sluts and whores! #Traditionalist”
- (11/10/17) KCT: “Cover up your tits, sluts. Oh, and your asses too, whores. Want to be respected?! COVER UP COVER UP COVER UP COVER UP”
- (1/15/17) KCT: “OMG HIDE YOUR TITS THE VIRGIN NECKBEARDS R MAD THAT UR ROBBING PPL WITH THEM!! AHH!!”
- (11/27/17) ZU (@thezombiunicorn): “If you wore a REAL shirt no one would treat you like the titty streamer you are’ ‘You’d have no viewers if you covered up your tits’ ‘You’re asking for it because you dress like a slut’ ‘Tits are OBVIOUSLY the focus of your stream you whore’ #Twitch”
- (3/20/17) BG (@byndogehk): “You’re wearing the virgin killer sweater? You changed, slut’ ‘This fad is stupid’ ‘You’re charging too much when I can get boobs for fr—’ Shhh, let people enjoy things.

The sarcasm in these statements is indicative of women’s acknowledgement of the misinformation and demonization that pervades the discourse around performances of femininity and sexuality. Acknowledging that these quotes mimic the complaints of men, and some women, on Twitch, these female streamers point out that responsibility for their appearance and sexuality makes women simultaneously responsible for men and their morality even though, as BD points out, “it’s not our fault if some men wanna insist they’re animals incapable of restraint.” These quotes echo the sentiment that people can see a naked female body for free on the internet if they want to, and men must encounter women out and about IRL who wear clothing similar to the “Twitch whores” and “sluts” they scorn so much, so the question becomes whether or not there is a time or place where a woman’s body isn’t being sexualized and held against her?

I find that women remain demonized in the digital age and only when most people agree that women have the right to sexual equality can all women be free to take back labels like “slut” and “witch” (Sollée 2017). As Kaceytron states, “the past year on twitch felt like people were against broadcasters...imagine being a female broadcaster & and being deduced (sic) down to just being an attention slut camwhores leech, oh wait, that’s been going on since the start of Twitch :(.” While being labeled as “slut” and “camwhores” are intended to vilify authentic performances of femininity and sexuality, using labels like “slut” and “witch” tend to say more about the people using them than the recipients because they reflect the beliefs of the users. The witch is neither good nor bad, but dependent on the gaze of men, other women, and the discourse of the interface to determine which side of the divide she falls into. The witch is both the symbol of female power and female persecution in that she is at once expected to acknowledge herself as a witch who is deceiving and misleading men while also claiming the witch identity as the privilege to create her own authentic sexual representations by subverting the traditional male gaze like the “sluts” and “camwhores” they are so commonly compared to (Sollée 2017).

Conclusion

A practical contribution of this research is a critique of the normalization of harassment behavior online, how effective women’s different responses to it have been, and providing structural solutions for platforms like Twitch to prevent the proliferation of misogyny online. Harassment behavior like witch hunting is made normal and, at least moderately acceptable through the inconsistent punishment of it, by being implemented into the language that structures platforms like Twitch and subsequently provides guidelines for people to structure their witch hunts around. Women’s, and Twitch’s, responses to witch hunting have been varied in form and effectiveness, but as the structure of the platform has changed to include different categories of

content as legitimate, women have gained more agency in creating content featuring authentic performances of femininity and sexuality.

The theoretical contributions of this research are manifested in the concepts of witch hunting and authentic femininity. Through the combined interface and discourse analysis in this thesis, authentic femininity emerged as a concept that explains the standard against which women's performances of femininity and sexuality are measured in the digital age. In the digital age, people have become obsessed with authentic performances of self, in part because of the accessibility made possible by interconnections between different forms of digital media, which could explain why Twitch has grown into such a lucrative means of subsistence. Similar to its contemporary and unwitting competitor, adult webcam modeling, success on Twitch is predicated on how effectively people can market themselves as a brand worth buying. However, what counts for authentic varies by context, and these variations dictate the type of witch hunting that takes place even if the purpose is always the same. Witch hunting is introduced as a concept in this thesis to explain the form and function of harassment behavior directed toward female sexual independence in the digital age.

Future research should shift its focus from studying multiplicity of self and anonymity made possible by digital media to examining the affective properties of choosing whether or not to practice authenticity as a response to witch hunting, and what the expectations of authenticity are as they vary by context. In particular, because adult webcam models and digital sex workers appear to be the standard amongst which women on the internet are compared to, future studies should explore what the differences between being a prude by de-emphasizing sexualized appearances and performances, fully nude and explicit in one's sexuality, or lewd are, and how these differences affect women's conceptions of authenticity in digital space.

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