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**Keeping Time Together:
Rethinking Content and Value Creation
In Synchronous Influencer Marketing Ecosystems**

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Doctoral Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how the shift from asynchronous to synchronous interaction reconfigures digital work and value creation within influencer marketing ecosystems. Drawing on a multi-method qualitative design, including long-term immersion in livestreaming environments, in-depth interviews and an industrial collaboration with AK Informatica, the study conceptualizes livestreaming as a synchronous field that demands continuous temporal alignment.

The findings show that actors engage in a distributed work of synchronization: the ongoing labor through which streamers, audiences, brands, moderators, and intermediaries realign their rhythms and expectations to sustain coherence in real-time. At the core of this process lies streamers' distinctive *endurance improvisation*, an individual temporal competence that allows them to remain adaptive and responsive under pressure. This ability sets streamers apart from other creators, positioning them as hybrid figures within the influencer marketing landscape. Synchronization unfolds through the management of multiple temporalities (Chronos, Kairos, and Aion) which structure how coordination, experience, and relational duration are maintained. Through this stratification, synchrony emerges not as a fixed condition but as a fragile accomplishment reproduced through continuous adjustment. Adopting an ecosystem perspective, the dissertation introduces *relational equity* as the cumulative value generated by this sustained alignment, showing how temporal coordination extends from individual performance styles to broader ecosystem structures. Overall, the study advances influencer marketing research by positioning synchrony as an infrastructural condition of digital ecosystems and demonstrating how temporal alignment sustains participation, coherence, and value in livestreaming environments.

Keywords: Livestreaming; Synchronous Value Creation; Influencer Marketing Ecosystem; Relational Equity; Endurance Improvisation

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Introduction

Contextualization and Research Aim

Over the past two decades, the prominence of technological innovations has profoundly transformed the temporal structure of social life. The Internet is no longer merely a space of connection but an infrastructure that governs the simultaneity of interactions. Synchrony, the possibility of being together at the same time (even when not in the same place), has begun to redefine how people socialize, produce culture, and communicate brands. The rise of livestreaming, gaming, and social media exemplifies this logic of online participation, as audiences do not only consume but actively co-create experiences as they happen. As a result, digital interactions are inherently volatile, content creation retains meaning only within the live session, and value creation unfolds under conditions of uncertainty, often triggered by unpredictable events. The stability of the digital ecosystem is consequently undermined, as it becomes less governable, along with the actors' capacity to thrive within environments where synchrony has fundamentally altered the rules of the game.

The aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the literature on influencer marketing and digital labor, brand relationships, and value creation by exploring the internal dynamics of a synchronous ecosystem. Ultimately, it seeks to provide both managerial and societal implications while shedding light on this emerging, and highly lucrative, global marketing phenomenon.

Rethinking content and value creation in the age of synchrony

Traditional marketing has long been grounded in spatial competition, recommending how firms should configure the marketing mix and position their brands within markets. Within these context, value co-creation has been conceptualized as a process of interaction and resource integration among multiple actors that generates reciprocal benefit within a network of relationships (Sarasvuo et al., 2022). This perspective defines relationships as reciprocal and actor-to-actor, marking a shift from a goods-dominant to a service-dominant logic that foregrounds the consumer-centric orientation of modern business (Vargo & Lusch, 2012).

Building on this relational turn, research on consumption communities, including subcultures of consumption, brand communities, and consumer tribes (Canniford, 2011), has underscored the centrality of consumers in value creation and the development of brand equity (Aaker, 1992). Consumers increasingly intervene in corporate processes, shaping networks of meaning through the sharing of experiences and opinions that reframe the firm's symbolic and economic value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Möller et al, 2020 ; Andreini et al., 2020).

As a result, value co-creation process becomes redistributed across ecosystem actors, where consumers' interpersonal relationships are as consequential as their relationships with brands (Gensler et al., 2013). Lemon et al. (2001) were among the first to conceptualize this shift analyzing customer equity as the sum of *value equity*, *brand equity* and *relationship equity*, highlighting the affective dimensions of consumer-brand relations (Lemon et al., 2001; Rust et al., 2004). These frameworks collectively situate brand value within the relational sphere, where participation, engagement, and loyalty are continuously co-produced through online and offline affective exchanges.

However, contemporary digital ecosystems are increasingly defined by *synchrony*, the condition of being “in time together”, whereby real-time exchanges and interactions are enabled by social media platform affordances. Originating in linguistics and later adopted within sociology and systems theory (Andersen, 2008), synchrony refers to the co-presence of elements within a shared temporal frame (Hrastinski, 2008; Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2019), capturing the infrastructural dimension through which activities can be organized, aligned, and scheduled (Reinecke & Ansari, 2017; Hassan, 2003) As a result, synchronous environments give rise to another kind of competition, where brands contend for consumers' immediate attention and strive to translate fleeting visibility into more enduring forms of value (Rosa, 2013; Fuchs, 2013).

Through an interdisciplinary framework combining marketing research and media studies, this dissertation conceive synchrony as a structural condition of digital interaction, ecosystems as the locus of relational value, and time as the infrastructure that sustains it.

eSport as Research Site and AK Informatica as a Research Partner

Within this broader transformation, the eSport industry offers a fertile ground for examining the related social and managerial implications of synchronous ecosystem. What originated as a niche practice within gaming culture has evolved into a global and increasingly professionalized ecosystem that fuses entertainment, technology, and community participation (Wagner, 2006; Taylor, 2018; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019; Hamilton et al., 2014). Beyond its economic dimension, eSport constitutes a cultural arena where synchronous interactions among players, audiences, and brands expose the real-time dynamics of a society increasingly organized around continuous connectivity (Reitman et al., 2020; Banyai et al., 2019; Sjöblom et al., 2019; Rietz & Hallmann, 2023; Pizzo et al., 2022). Closely intertwined with the rise of social media and influencer cultures (Zhang et al., 2024), platforms such as Twitch have blurred the boundaries between competition, entertainment, and everyday sociability, transforming professional players and streamers into cultural intermediaries (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). Their dynamics exemplify how digital labor shifts from curated, asynchronous content (Fuchs, 2013; Abidin 2016, 2017) toward spontaneous co-presence, making eSport an ideal field for exploring synchronous participation.

AK Informatica and AK eSport

This doctoral research was conducted in collaboration with AK Informatica Tech S.R.L., an Italian company founded in 2004 by Alessio Cicolari. Initially specialized in hardware for gaming and simulation, AK Informatica has evolved into a diversified holding operating across the entire online gaming value chain. Alongside its core activity in hardware production, the company has become a leading actor in eSport event organization, offering high-performance equipment, venue setup, and full-scale event management, including logistics, communication, and marketing. Through its coworking hub, AK Informatica also supports startups and professionals with consulting services in eSport law, intellectual property, contract management, and IT infrastructure.

As a provider of integrated eSport solutions, AK Esport collaborates with major automotive and motorsport brands such as Dallara, Ferrari, Porsche, and SRO, co-developing high-profile sim-racing tournaments including the Porsche eSports Carrera Cup Italia and the SRO eSports Series. These initiatives have helped bridge the gap between virtual and traditional racing, contributing to the institutional recognition of eSport as a legitimate professional domain. Beyond events, AK Informatica offers consulting to professional teams (covering talent scouting, training, sponsorship, and communication strategy) while promoting the sustainable growth of the industry through infrastructure, education, and partnerships.

The partnership between the University of Bergamo and AK Informatica allowed this research to integrate academic inquiry with industrial practice, combining theoretical rigor with managerial relevance. The collaboration contributed to a dual objective: to advance academic understanding of the eSport phenomenon while generating practical insights for firms navigating its emerging logics. In particular, the research seeks to translate the cultural and relational mechanisms of eSport into the vocabulary of brand strategy and influencer marketing, offering a conceptual bridge between academic theory and managerial application.

Research Outline

The dissertation is organized into five chapters, each contributing to a cumulative understanding of how synchrony reshapes digital labor and value creation in contemporary marketing ecosystem.

Chapter 1 presents the eSport industry as a complex socio-economic and cultural field. It offers a systematic overview of its evolution, key actors, and institutional challenges, situating eSport as a privileged site for observing real-time dynamics. Chapter 2 connects eSport context to the rise of influencer marketing, explaining how creators have become strategic intermediaries between brands and audiences in increasingly interactive and participatory ecosystems. From the convergence of these two domains (gaming and influencers) streamers emerge as the primary empirical field of this dissertation. Chapter 3 deepens this analysis by focusing on livestreaming as a site of synchronous participation. It frames streamers within the influencer marketing landscape for their distinctive labor

of endurance improvisation. Then, by delineating four archetypes (Guru, Host, Master and Showman), it investigates how streamers manage and interpret time to sustain engagement, coordinate content creation, and integrate advertising, according to two main emerging logics. Through the analytical triad of *Chronos–Kairos–Aion* as layered temporalities, the chapter illustrates how synchrony prompts streamers to generate new forms of temporal structures, demonstrating their work of synchronization.

Chapter 4 adopts an ecosystemic perspective on livestreaming, conceptualizing how value is co-created through relational interdependencies among brands, creators, platforms, and audiences. It demonstrates that value is sustained not only through economic transactions but through the continuous coordination and mutual adjustment of actors over time. It shows how this process, defined as *relational equity*, unfolds along a spiral dynamic that expands from the community level to the broader ecosystem level.

Finally, Chapter 5 integrates the findings from the previous studies and articulates their broader theoretical, managerial, and societal implications. It discusses how actors shift from synchronous stability to relational instability, proposing how they navigate the layered temporalities of synchrony through a continuous work of synchronization that unfolds spirally from micro to macro level and enables multiple stakeholders to remain temporally aligned.

Chapter 1

The eSport Industry and The Rise of Livestreaming

1.1 The rise of e-sports as a socio-economic phenomenon

As Wagner (2006) defines it, eSport is

“an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies” (Wagner, 2006, p. 3)

Conceived as electronic sport, eSports encompass a broad range of competitive digital activities across genres such as strategy, combat, sports simulation, and action games, involving both individual and team formats. Over time, this field has evolved into a structured industry with substantial commercial, technological, and cultural implications.

The trajectory of the eSports industry shows a steady upward growth supported by both economic expansion and increasing audience engagement. Between 2024 and 2032, the global eSports market is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 20.7%, while revenues are expected to increase at 16.5% annually between 2017 and 2027 (Fortune Business Insight, 2023). In terms of audience size, dedicated eSports enthusiasts are expected to surpass 318 million by 2025, with an additional 323 million occasional viewers (Newzoo, 2022). Sponsorships account for nearly 60% of total industry revenue, followed by media rights, publisher fees, merchandising, ticket sales, and digital streaming. The latter has become one of the fastest-growing segments, boosted by the rise of NFTs and by evolving brand strategies seeking to engage younger audiences (Newzoo, 2022).

Geographically, the Asia-Pacific region remains the most profitable market, generating approximately \$590 million in revenues, followed by North America (\$350 million) and Europe (\$345 million). Although Asia-Pacific leads in total value, cultural integration and awareness of

eSports are comparatively stronger in Europe and North America, particularly when measured by the proportion of online populations engaging in live-streamed content. As Cranmer et al. (2021) note, in South Korea eSports benefit from formal government recognition and are broadcast through both digital and traditional media, while in Western markets they rely primarily on platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, limiting exposure through conventional channels.

Historically, the industry's foundations can be traced back to the broader video-game sector. The first major formalized competition occurred in 1980 when Atari organized the *Space Invaders Championship*, attracting over 10,000 participants across the United States (Li, 2016). This pioneering event laid the groundwork for future competitive gaming. The diffusion of internet connectivity during the 1990s marked a turning point, enabling multiplayer experiences and remote competitions (Taylor, 2018). The launch of Xbox Live and PlayStation Network in the early 2000s further normalized online console gaming, while dedicated tournament organizers emerged as key intermediaries in a rapidly expanding market. A decisive milestone arrived in 2016 with the *League of Legends World Final* at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, attended by 20,000 spectators and streamed by over 43 million viewers worldwide (Kennedy & Rozelle, 2016), signaling the industry's transition into mainstream entertainment.

Beyond its technological and infrastructural expansion, the evolution of eSports has been shaped by cultural perceptions inherited from gaming culture. Despite its global popularity and growing professionalism, the field still contends with lingering stereotypes that portray players as socially isolated or immature; narratives that obscure the sector's complexity and diversity. Recent scholarship highlights how gaming culture now permeates everyday life to such an extent that it can be described as a form of *videoludification* of society (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). Principles originating in video games (such as gamification, interactivity, and participatory engagement) have become integral to education, events, and media consumption. Gamification strategies are used to enhance learning (Chen et al., 2021b), audience engagement frameworks borrow from game-based mechanics (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018), and social-media platforms increasingly rely on participatory interaction

to sustain user involvement (Jenkins, 2008). Consumers are thus no longer passive recipients but active co-creators of meaning within digital environments.

Given the historical role of video-game culture in driving technological innovation, studying eSports provides a valuable vantage point for understanding how emerging socio-technical dynamics shape markets and cultures. The sector operates at the intersection of technology, entertainment, and community, offering a preview of broader transformations toward immersive experiences, virtual environments, and hybrid forms of interaction that will increasingly define the future of media and marketing.

1.2 Literature Review Methodology

To provide a comprehensive overview of the evolving eSports industry, this chapter integrates both academic and grey literature. The academic literature offers theory-driven and in-depth analyses, while grey literature contributes contextual insights and longitudinal perspectives that help trace the phenomenon's cultural and societal evolution. The integration of these two sources enables a more balanced understanding of eSports as both an economic sector and a socio-technical system.

Grey literature was examined to capture the broader narrative and public discourse surrounding the rise of eSports. Two primary databases (NexisUni and MediaCloud) were used to gather news articles and media content. In NexisUni, a comprehensive search was conducted to identify all relevant items published since the emergence of the eSports phenomenon. Variations of the term "esport" were used in the title field ("esport", "e-sport", "eSport", "Esport", "esports", "e-sports", "eSports", "Esports"), and the results were filtered to include only English-language articles from Europe and North America. All entries were exported into a single database, with the earliest publication dating back to 1986.

Given that academic and media attention toward eSports intensified after the year 2000, MediaCloud was used to monitor the evolution of coverage and interest from that period onward. The search was restricted to the "US National Sources" and "EU Media Monitor" datasets, generating approximately 4,000 news items. This allowed for a distant reading of the industry's narrative trajectory across

regions and timeframes. Additional secondary materials were drawn from documentaries and television series—such as *Free to Play* (Valve, 2014) and *High Score* (Netflix, 2020)—which helped contextualize the historical development of eSports within popular culture.

To complement these sources with rigorous theoretical grounding, a systematic search of peer-reviewed research was conducted across major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Business Source Premier, and Google. Keywords included “esport”, “business model”, “systematic review”, “literature review”, “competitive gaming”, and “marketing”. The search was limited to papers published between March 2018 and October 2022, a period coinciding with the formal institutionalization of eSports in academic research.

The final selection comprised ten peer-reviewed papers, chosen for their relevance and conceptual contribution to business, marketing, and socio-cultural analyses of eSports. Each source was validated through the Academic Journal Guide (2021) to ensure quality and reliability. The integration of these materials enabled the identification of overlapping thematic areas and recurring research domains. From this process, a three-level analytical framework was developed: market and industry level, focusing on the structure, growth, and regulation of the eSports sector; business and management level, examining revenue models, stakeholder roles, and ecosystem dynamics; consumer and cultural level, analyzing behavioral, experiential, and community-related dimensions.

The following sections of the chapter adopt this framework to progressively move from the macro-level evolution of the eSports industry to the micro-level dynamics of participation and marketing. This layered approach provides a coherent structure through which the field’s economic, cultural, and communicative developments can be jointly interpreted.

1.3 eSport Overview: Definition, Research and Challenges

1.3.1 Conceptual ambiguity and definitional issues

Despite its rapid evolution, eSports remains a relatively young and fragmented industry marked by conceptual ambiguity and disciplinary divergence. One of the most persistent challenges lies in the absence of a universally accepted definition. As Formosa et al. (2022) observe, this ambiguity has

limited both academic and practical progress by fostering inconsistent assumptions and disciplinary misalignment. Their thematic analysis identified nine recurring dimensions used to define eSports, among which competition, organization, and professionalism are the most frequently cited. Other attributes (such as spectatorship, tournaments, skill development, and commercial activity) complement these dimensions but are insufficient on their own to delineate the phenomenon. Even the term itself appears inconsistently in the literature, with variations such as *esport*, *e-sport*, *eSport*, and *Esports*, reflecting disciplinary preferences and geographic conventions (Formosa et al., 2022). This terminological instability underscores the field's transitional nature and complicates efforts to establish shared theoretical frameworks.

1.3.2 Disciplinary perspective

Recent research has sought to clarify the conceptual scope of eSports by mapping the disciplines involved in its study. Formosa et al. (2022) report that most publications fall within Science and Engineering, Medicine and Health, and Business and Economics. Within these fields, scholars have examined the physical and psychological well-being of professional players, the institutional and economic dimensions of professional leagues, and the marketing strategies emerging from this hybrid industry. Contributions also come from Social Sciences, Humanities, and Sport and Recreation, highlighting the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of eSports research.

Reitman et al. (2020) similarly identified the main research domains as Media Studies, Informatics, Business, Sport Science, Sociology, Law, and Cognitive Science. The longitudinal trend suggests sustained interest from business and management perspectives, alongside growing attention from psychology and social theory. Together, these approaches reveal that eSports cannot be reduced to a single disciplinary lens but rather represents a multi-dimensional ecosystem combining technological infrastructure, economic coordination, and cultural production.

Within business and management studies, three areas of inquiry have gained prominence. The first one relates to ecosystem and value creation, examining stakeholder roles and networked business models (Seo, 2013; Riatti & Thiel, 2022; Flegr & Schmidt, 2022); the second concern marketing and

consumer behavior – focusing on engagement motivations, sponsorship models, and brand positioning (Reitman et al., 2020; Sjöblom et al., 2019; Cranmer et al., 2021; Pizzo et al., 2022) and the last expand socio-cultural implications, exploring identity, gender, and community-building dynamics (Bányai et al., 2019; Rogstad, 2022).

These contributions collectively frame eSports as both an economic industry and a social phenomenon deeply embedded in digital culture.

1.3.3 Core debates and conceptual boundaries

eSport and video gaming

A foundational debate concerns the distinction between video gaming and eSports. While video gaming encompasses the general activity of playing digital games, eSports refer specifically to organized, rule-bound competition between human players, either individually or in teams (Pizzo et al., 2022; Riatti & Thiel, 2022). In this sense, eSports constitute a subset of gaming characterized by institutionalized structures and performance-based outcomes.

Scholz (2020) traces this competitive dimension to the earliest phases of gaming, noting that titles like Tennis for Two (1958) already combined interactive competition with entertainment value. Across genres (from MOBA and RTS to FPS and Battle Royale) eSports maintain this competitive logic while extending it through digital infrastructures that connect global audiences.

Regional differences reinforce these dynamics. In South Korea, eSports are formally recognized as a national sport, supported by government regulation and institutional frameworks that ensure professional stability. In contrast, Western eSports ecosystems remain more decentralized and commercially driven, often described as a “Wild West” of entrepreneurial experimentation and fragmented governance (Scholz, 2020). This contrast underscores the diversity of institutional paths shaping the global industry.

eSports and Traditional Sport

Another long-standing debate concerns whether eSports can be considered sport. The core distinction traditionally rests on the requirement of physical ability. While eSports primarily involve cognitive,

perceptual, and fine motor skills, many scholars argue that these dimensions also constitute forms of physicality. As Jonasson and Thiborg (2010) note, although eSports may not fully mirror traditional sport, they are evolving toward similar levels of structure and professionalism.

Several frameworks have been proposed to evaluate this status. Philosophical perspectives such as those of Guttmann (1978) and Suits (2007) define sport as a voluntary, rule-based, and skill-oriented activity, a definition that eSports clearly meet. Empirical evidence supports this claim: professional players train intensively, follow regulated competitions, and operate within institutional frameworks increasingly comparable to those of established sports (Cranmer et al., 2021).

The question of legitimacy, however, extends beyond theory to legal and institutional dimensions. Unlike traditional sports, eSports often lack standardized regulation, player protections, and consistent governance (Reitman et al., 2020). Their classification has implications for labor rights, taxation, and international competition. The International Olympic Committee's reluctance to recognize eSports as sport reflects this ambiguity, citing insufficient physicality and institutional cohesion (Cranmer et al., 2021).

Despite these challenges, the sector continues to professionalize rapidly. Collegiate programs, scholarship initiatives, and professional leagues have formalized career paths for eSports athletes, while hybrid forms of competition integrating virtual and augmented reality suggest new intersections between digital and embodied performance. As Seth et al. (2016) note, the broader definition of sport is evolving to include digitally mediated forms of competition, a shift that mirrors the ongoing cultural integration of eSports into mainstream society.

1.3.4 Key Issues and Challenges in the eSports Industry

Despite its rapid professionalization, the eSports industry remains characterized by fragmentation and institutional instability. The absence of a centralized authority and the dominance of game publishers in regulating competition prevent the formation of coherent governance structures (Holden et al., 2017). As intellectual property owners, publishers retain full control over game rules, tournament licensing, and commercial exploitation, creating asymmetries of power that hinder standardization

and transparency. The resulting decentralization, described by Scholz (2020) as “decentralized professionalization”, allows innovation to flourish but limits the development of collective regulation and shared ethical norms.

Alongside governance, labor conditions and player welfare have emerged as critical issues. Professional players often operate without standardized contracts, union representation, or consistent legal protection, facing job insecurity and limited access to healthcare or benefits (Green, 2016; Holden et al., 2017). While some countries have begun integrating eSports into formal education and collegiate programs, these initiatives remain uneven and often reproduce existing inequalities, particularly regarding gender and inclusion. Addressing these disparities is essential to ensure the sustainable growth and social legitimacy of the sector.

Finally, cultural challenges such as toxicity, harassment, and gender discrimination continue to undermine community cohesion and industry credibility (Consalvo, 2012). Although publishers and tournament organizers have introduced codes of conduct and diversity policies, progress is slow and enforcement inconsistent. Achieving legitimacy for eSports therefore depends not only on economic performance but also on the ability to align competitive success with ethical responsibility and inclusivity. These tensions reveal that the consolidation of eSports as an institutional field is still underway—a condition that makes it a particularly revealing context for examining how digital ecosystems organize value, regulation, and social participation.

1.4 The eSport Business

1.4.1 The ecosystem

The eSports industry operates as a multilayered ecosystem composed of interdependent actors whose interactions define its economic, technological, and cultural configuration. Scholz (2020) identifies the audience as the central stakeholder around which all others orient their activities. Within this system, actors can be broadly categorized into secondary, primary, and core stakeholders, connected through overlapping networks of value creation. Primary stakeholders engage directly in eSports production (game developers, tournament organizers, and professional teams) while secondary

stakeholders such as sponsors, investors, and media providers sustain the ecosystem through financial and institutional support. Core stakeholders, including players and communities, represent both the foundation and the connective tissue of the industry, providing legitimacy, participation, and engagement.

This configuration mirrors the structure of traditional sports yet diverges in governance and value distribution. Because game publishers maintain control over intellectual property and competition rights, they occupy a dominant regulatory position (Holden et al., 2017). The absence of independent federations comparable to FIFA or the IOC results in a decentralized ecosystem where cooperation and competition coexist. Scholz (2020) describes these relations through the principle of cooptation, in which rival actors collaborate to ensure the system's continuity.

(Figure 1).

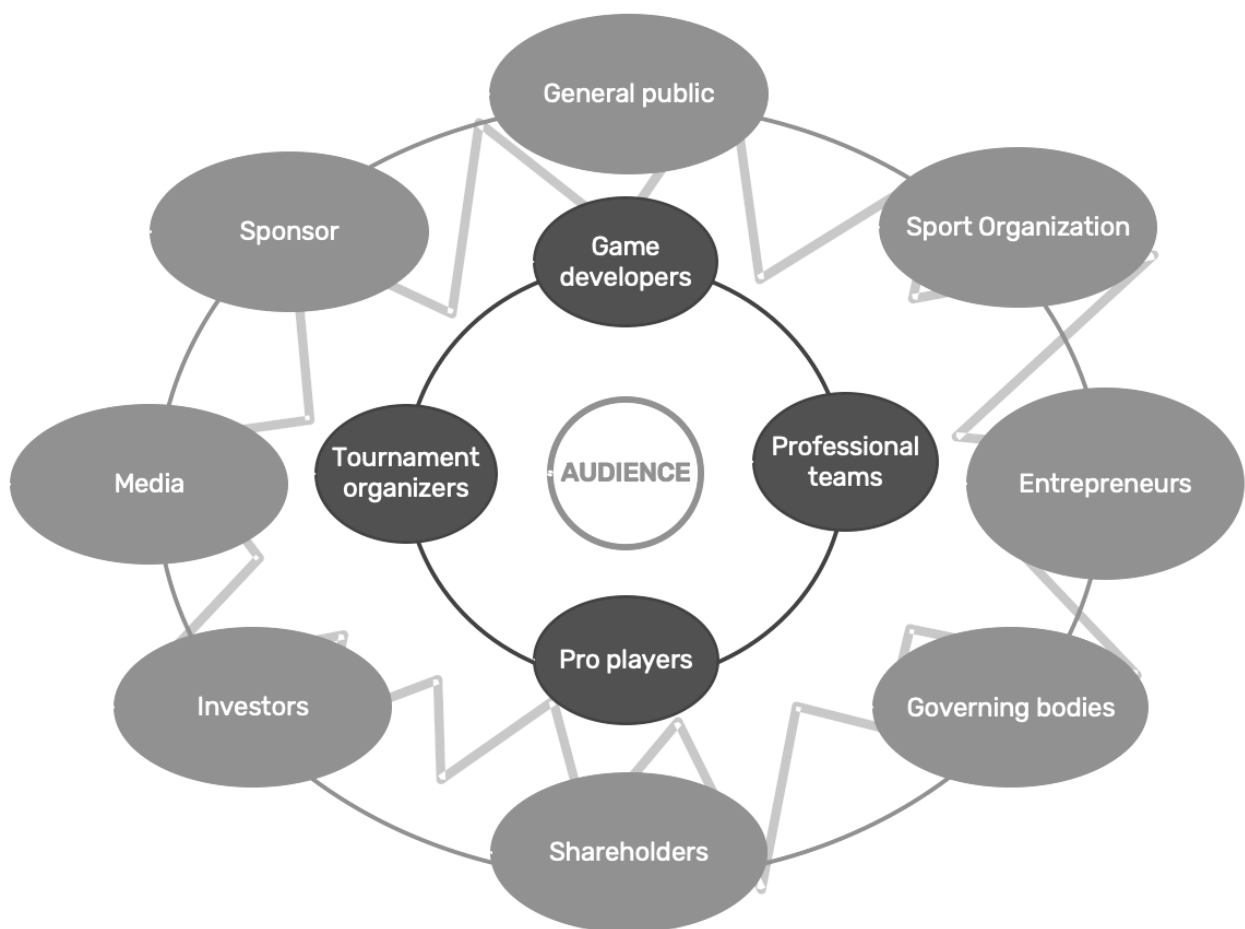


Figure 1 *eSport Ecosystem revised by the author from Scholz (2020)*

1.4.2 Secondary Stakeholders: External Enablers

Secondary stakeholders, though peripheral to daily gameplay, shape the industry's strategic direction through investment, infrastructure, and policy. These include sponsors, media companies, and public institutions. Traditional broadcasters such as ESPN and digital platforms such as YouTube and Twitch have been instrumental in transforming eSports into a mainstream form of entertainment. Twitch alone recorded over 5.6 billion hours watched in the second quarter of 2022, surpassing competitors such as YouTube Gaming and Facebook Gaming.

Sponsorship from non-endemic brands—those outside the gaming industry—continues to expand, attracted by eSports' young, digitally native audiences and high engagement levels (Pizzo et al., 2022). Governments have also played an increasing role, especially in Asia, where state support has contributed to infrastructure development and formal recognition of eSports as sport. In contrast, many Western markets remain underregulated, with fragmented policies and limited institutional frameworks (Cranmer et al., 2021).

1.4.3 Primary Stakeholders: Industry Operators

Primary stakeholders directly generate and distribute value within the eSports ecosystem. These include game publishers and developers, hardware manufacturers, tournament organizers, and professional teams. Publishers such as Riot Games, Valve Corporation, and Activision Blizzard are the most influential actors due to their ownership of intellectual property. They control not only the production and maintenance of games but also the licensing of competitive events. This dual role, content owner and rule-maker, grants them disproportionate influence over the industry's organization (Holden et al., 2017).

Tournament organizers and leagues (e.g., ESL, DreamHack, Blast Premier) mediate between publishers and players, while professional teams operate similarly to traditional sports clubs. Supported by both endemic and non-endemic sponsors, these organizations invest in training, analytics, and talent development to enhance competitiveness and visibility. Team branding and social

media engagement have become central marketing strategies, blurring distinctions between athletic performance and entertainment (Scholz, 2020).

Hardware manufacturers such as Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo provide the technological infrastructure that supports gameplay. Although global console sales have plateaued, cross-platform integration and hardware–software compatibility remain key drivers of accessibility and performance innovation.

1.4.4 Core Stakeholders: Players and Communities

At the center of the eSports ecosystem are its core stakeholders: professional players and gaming communities. These actors simultaneously operate as producers and consumers, sustaining the ecosystem’s viability through their active participation and engagement, which in turn enables other stakeholders to generate economic value (Scholz, 2020). While the role of communities is widely acknowledged as essential to the continuity of eSports activities, professional players remain a more contested subject within the literature. Communities co-create content, moderate discussions, analyze professional performances, and contribute to the broader social fabric of eSports. Their shared language, rituals, and collective histories reinforce identity and a sense of belonging (Hand and Moore, 2006), positioning them as the cultural backbone of the ecosystem.

Professional player VS casual gamer

eSports athletes engage in intensive training routines comparable to those of traditional sports professionals. Their performance depends on physical dexterity, cognitive agility, and strategic coordination, and many teams now provide psychological and physical support services to promote well-being and career longevity in high-pressure environments (Pizzo et al., 2022). Despite such parallels, eSports players experience instability both in terms of contractual regulation and identity formation, raising questions within psychology and sports studies about the nature of their activity. Formosa et al. (2022) questioned whether eSports can be considered a leisure activity, noting that while casual gaming is typically motivated by recreation, professional players view their practice as work and identify as athletes (Cranmer et al., 2021). Building on Seo’s (2016) notion of “serious

leisure,” Banyai et al. (2019) conceptualize eSports as an intermediate activity between casual leisure and work, one that carries both professional and personal implications.

This distinction between professional and casual players has attracted scholarly attention across cognitive and behavioral sciences. Research compares novices and experts to assess cognitive performance, behavioral patterns, and situational awareness during competitive play (Reitman et al., 2020), revealing that the boundary between eSports and gaming remains fluid. Skill remains a central criterion for this distinction. Suits (2007) argues that sport requires skill-based performance rather than luck, and eSports meet this condition through rapid reflexes, manual dexterity, and high levels of strategic and tactical intelligence. Empirical research supports these claims: video gaming has been shown to enhance creativity and problem-solving, reaction time and memory and collaborative capacities in multiplayer environments (e.g. Granic et al., 2014; Toril et al., 2016).

Accordingly, eSports fulfill many of the definitional criteria of sport by combining physical and cognitive skills. However, the degree of physicality remains contested. Hemphill (2005) maintains that bodily proficiency is a defining characteristic of sport, where movement must directly influence competitive outcomes. Although eSports primarily involve fine motor skills (such as the manipulation of controllers or keyboards) precision and bodily control are essential to success. Activities like archery or shooting similarly rely on fine motor control rather than gross motor exertion (Haibach et al., 2011), suggesting that physicality in sport can take multiple forms.

Critics often question the sedentary nature of eSports and the absence of physical risk. Yet motion-based video games (MBVGs) blur this boundary by integrating sensors and body tracking to simulate movement, fostering balance, flexibility, and strength (Oh and Yang, 2010). Jonasson (2016) distinguishes between narrow and broad conceptualizations of sport: the former emphasizing direct physical engagement, and the latter encompassing organized activities that require measurable physical input. Within this broader view, eSports qualify as sports given their reliance on motor precision, strategic thinking, and structured competition (Wagner, 2006).

Nevertheless, the physical and psychological consequences of prolonged gaming cannot be ignored. Repetitive strain injuries such as tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome are common among professional players, while extended sedentary behavior is associated with obesity and musculoskeletal discomfort (Chaput et al., 2011). Eye strain and headaches caused by screen exposure further impair cognitive performance, and excessive play has been linked to “Internet Gaming Disorder,” classified by the American Psychological Association as involving impaired control, withdrawal, and continued gaming despite negative consequences (Faust & Prochaska, 2018). Although some research links violent games to aggression, evidence for a causal relationship remains inconsistent (Przybylski et al., 2017).

Alongside these risks, video games also offer cognitive and social benefits. They provide entertainment, social connection, and intellectual stimulation, supporting the development of attention control, spatial reasoning, and strategic planning (Owen et al., 2010). As with many forms of human activity, the balance between benefit and harm depends on moderation. Professional eSports athletes, in particular, require structured health management to prevent injury and burnout (Grinspoon, 2020).

The institutional recognition of eSports has grown rapidly. In 2014, Robert Morris University became the first U.S. institution to establish an eSports program, and by 2018, over fifty colleges had joined the National Association of Collegiate eSports (AACCRAO, 2018). Governments in several countries have since recognized eSports competitors as professional athletes, enhancing the field’s legitimacy and aligning it more closely with traditional sports. eSports teams now mirror conventional athletic organizations: players wear uniforms, train daily, and compete regularly under professional coaches. Despite the absence of high-impact movement, these athletes face physical strain, particularly in the hands and wrists due to repetitive stress.

Empirical studies confirm that eSports players display extraordinary motor and cognitive performance. Lewis et al. (2011) estimate that elite players perform approximately 500 actions per minute, supported by four to ten hours of daily practice. Health studies further reveal limited physical

activity and recurring ailments such as eye strain, back and neck pain, and wrist discomfort (Di Francisco-Donoghue et al., 2019). The World Health Organization (2018) has also classified gaming disorder as a behavioral condition marked by impaired self-regulation and functional impairment.

To mitigate these challenges, scholars recommend integrating wellness programs and specialized professionals within eSports teams. Regular physical and psychological assessments, along with the presence of psychologists, physiotherapists, and nutritionists, can help prevent injuries and monitor player well-being (Di Francisco-Donoghue et al., 2019). Coaches play a pivotal role not only in performance optimization but also in maintaining athletes' mental health by fostering open communication and identifying early signs of distress (Walker et al., 2018). However, the absence of universal regulatory standards continues to hinder systematic health management in eSports. In regions where eSports lack formal recognition as sport, institutional support and medical infrastructure remain limited, often leading to inadequate care and persistent skepticism toward the legitimacy of eSports athletes (Di Francisco-Donoghue et al., 2019).

1.5 Value Creation and Marketing in eSports

The interdependence among stakeholders within the eSports industry gives rise to a distinctive logic of value co-creation, grounded in collaboration, competition, and community participation. Rather than following a linear supply chain, the eSports ecosystem operates through a networked model where value is continuously produced and redistributed across players, teams, organizers, brands, and audiences (Scholz, 2020).

At the core of this model lies the audience. Spectators not only consume competitive entertainment but also shape it through attention, engagement, and affective participation. As Seo (2013) defines it, eSports represent “*a distinct segment of computer-game consumption, identified by the particular experiences of competitive gameplay that immerse, educate, entertain and engage consumers in play, co-created within the value network of marketing actors by means of specific forms of online and offline performances.*”

This participatory logic aligns with broader transformations in digital culture, where consumers have become prosumers, simultaneously producing and consuming symbolic and experiential value (Ritzer et al., 2012).

1.5.1 Business models and network dynamics

Two dominant business models currently structure the eSports economy. The Free-to-Play (F2P) model offers open access to games but monetizes through microtransactions, in-game purchases, and premium content. The Gaming-as-a-Service (GaaS) model, conversely, relies on subscriptions and continuous updates, turning gaming into a long-term service experience. Both approaches foster sustained engagement but raise ethical and regulatory concerns regarding addiction, gambling mechanics, and pay-to-win systems (Pizzo et al., 2022).

To conceptualize how stakeholders navigate this interdependence, Scholz (2020) proposes the 3Cs framework: coopetition, describing how competitors (e.g., publishers, teams, leagues) collaborate to maintain ecosystem viability; co-destiny, capturing shared long-term objectives that foster trust and resilience; convergence, referring to the alignment of strategies and business logics across actors.

Within this framework, value creation emerges as a process of mutual integration in which each actor contributes to the ecosystem by leveraging the resources and visibility of others. Publishers provide content and regulation, organizers mediate visibility, sponsors supply capital and legitimacy, and audiences deliver the attention that sustains all other actors.

1.5.2 Marketing and experiential engagement

Marketing in eSports is rooted in experience, participation, and community resonance. Tournaments and live events epitomize experiential consumption: fans are drawn not only by skillful play but by the emotions, rituals, and collective immersion surrounding the competition (Johnson and Woodcock, 2021). Practices such as cosplay and fan art extend this engagement beyond events, transforming spectatorship into active participation and reinforcing community belonging (Raney & Bryant, 2006). For brands, eSports represent both a communication platform and a cultural arena. Publishers, manufacturers, and sponsors use tournaments to promote products, test innovations, and reinforce

positioning within digital youth cultures. The audience's high interactivity and skepticism toward traditional advertising require culturally fluent communication strategies. As Seo (2013) notes, success depends on authenticity, affective resonance, and respect for community norms. Non-endemic brands often rely on specialized agencies to mediate their approach and ensure relevance within gaming subcultures.

This demographic represents a strategic segment for eSports. In 2018, global viewership reached nearly 380 million, with most fans aged between 13 and 34. Approximately 78% of enthusiasts fall within this age group, highlighting the medium's appeal to younger consumers. According to Nielsen (2017), eSports fans spend an average of 8.2 hours per week playing games and 2.5 hours watching eSports content. Moreover, 58% of fans express positive attitudes toward brand involvement in events and teams, though 25% remain cautious about sponsorship on social media. Responding to this opportunity, leading publishers such as Riot Games and Blizzard Entertainment have established professional leagues modeled after traditional sports institutions like the NBA and NFL, creating new sponsorship channels and enhancing institutional legitimacy for brand investors.

The collaboration between Red Bull and eSports is often cited as a benchmark of effective integration: the brand has leveraged gaming events to reinforce its association with energy, competition, and creativity while empowering players as cultural icons. Such partnerships exemplify how eSports can function as ecosystems of cultural production, where brands, players, and audiences co-create symbolic and economic value.

1.5.3 From marketing platforms to cultural ecosystems

Despite its economic maturity, eSports' marketing potential remains only partially exploited. Many companies still adopt short-term sponsorships rather than long-term strategies of community building and brand co-creation. Yet, the future of marketing within eSports lies in sustained relational engagement rather than visibility alone.

As Cranmer et al. (2021) suggest, gaming communities serve as laboratories for new forms of participation, collaboration, and identity construction. They blur distinctions between work and play,

production and consumption, reflecting broader shifts toward experiential and relational economies. For marketers, understanding these dynamics means recognizing that value is generated not by the content itself but by the interactions and temporal presence that connect actors within the ecosystem. The eSports industry exemplifies how value in digital economies is increasingly co-created through networked participation and sustained interaction. Its hybrid configuration, where entertainment, community, and commerce converge, illustrates a broader transformation in marketing from message-based persuasion to relational orchestration. Within this landscape, players, fans, and brands collectively maintain the ecosystem through shared engagement and continuous visibility. These processes anticipate the rise of livestreaming as a new paradigm of synchronous influence, where interaction unfolds in real time and presence itself becomes a form of value. The next chapter examines this transition in greater depth, exploring how the convergence of performance, community, and commerce redefines participation within the livestreaming era.

1.6 eSport Entertainment Goes Online: The Rise of Livestreaming

While eSports originally developed around organized tournaments and structured competition, the emergence of livestreaming transformed this format into a continuous and participatory experience. What began as scheduled events evolved into an ongoing media environment that merges competition, entertainment, and social interaction. Livestreaming introduced a new media logic in which production and consumption occur simultaneously, blurring the boundaries between player and audience, leisure and labor. This shift redefined eSports as a real-time social performance rather than a periodic spectacle.

1.6.1 Origins and technological evolution

The concept of streaming, the continuous transmission of digital data, emerged in the 1980s and became integral to internet technologies in the 1990s (Spilker & Colbjørnsen, 2020). Broadband connectivity enabled the first live digital broadcasts, culminating in 2007 with the launch of Justin.tv, a platform that allowed users to share 24-hour live video of their daily lives. Gamers quickly appropriated this format to broadcast their gameplay, setting the stage for interactive and participatory

entertainment. In 2011, Justin.tv's gaming section became Twitch.tv, which soon established itself as the dominant platform for live online entertainment (Taylor, 2018; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019).

Twitch's success derived from its combination of technical affordances, low-latency streaming, real-time chat, and subscription systems, with a participatory architecture that placed users at the center of content creation. This model paralleled the broader rise of social media, where audiences gained control over what, when, and how to watch, marking the transition from one-way broadcasting to interactive engagement (Craig & Cunningham, 2019). Viewers could now interact directly with streamers, transforming consumption into shared experience.

1.6.2 From spectatorship to prosumption

The rise of livestreaming mirrors the evolution of user participation across the web. Whereas early online environments positioned users as passive recipients of content, Web 2.0 introduced interactive features that enabled users to become prosumers, simultaneously producing and consuming content (Ritzer et al., 2012). Livestreaming represents the culmination of this shift: each broadcast creates a shared temporal frame in which streamers and audiences co-construct meaning through comments, donations, and reactions (Sjöblom et al., 2019; Giertz et al., 2022).

This dynamic reconfigures entertainment as a form of distributed social labor involving both human and technological agents. Viewers contribute to shaping performances, reinforcing humor, and maintaining community norms in real time. Streamers, in turn, engage in continuous improvisation to sustain attention and emotional connection. The immediacy of such exchanges fosters intimacy and authenticity, qualities increasingly central to digital entertainment and influencer cultures. As Tammy Lin et al. (2019) note, livestreaming constitutes a multimedia form of online performance in which mediated presence and affective interaction become key sources of value.

1.6.3 The intertwining of livestreaming and eSports

Livestreaming and eSports have developed in a mutually reinforcing relationship. Competitive gaming provides the core content, while livestreaming platforms offer the infrastructure for its circulation and monetization. Every major eSports event is now broadcast live, extending physical

competitions into transnational digital communities and enabling audiences worldwide to experience a sense of co-presence with players (Taylor, 2018). At the same time, livestreaming has expanded beyond competitive play. Increasingly, content creators use platforms such as Twitch, YouTube Live, or Kick to broadcast hybrid formats combining gameplay, conversation, music, or lifestyle content (Lee et al., 2023). This shift moves the focus from pure performance to personality, turning gaming into a form of continuous public interaction. Through features such as donations, subscriptions, and branded collaborations, livestreaming embeds economic value directly within social relationships, transforming visibility and attention into monetizable resources.

As a result, the distinction between gamer, entertainer, and influencer has become fluid. Unlike professional eSports athletes, whose legitimacy derives from competition, streamers build their influence through consistency, authenticity, and emotional resonance. Their role extends beyond gaming skills to encompass affective communication and community management. In this sense, streamers embody a new form of hybrid digital labor, balancing play, performance, and entrepreneurship within the temporal rhythm of real-time interaction (Craig & Cunningham, 2019).

1.7 Why eSports and livestreaming matter for marketing research?

Studying eSports and livestreaming offers valuable insights into the transformation of marketing and media in a networked society. Both phenomena illustrate how entertainment, communication, and consumption increasingly converge in real-time environments, where value emerges from sustained interaction rather than discrete transactions. Livestreaming encapsulates key challenges for contemporary brands: managing ongoing engagement rather than isolated campaigns, maintaining transparency and authenticity, and navigating the overlap between personal and professional identity among creators.

In these contexts, value depends less on content production than on the ability to orchestrate connection and attention over time. eSports and livestreaming thus serve as laboratories for understanding emergent forms of synchronous influence, in which audiences co-create meaning and brand value through participation and affective investment (Seo, 2013; Cranmer et al., 2021).

By situating eSport as a socio-technical field, the previous chapter illustrated how real-time participation organizes both cultural belonging and market exchange. However, the rise of synchronous media extends beyond gaming, reshaping how value circulates across interconnected actors and platforms. The next chapter builds on this insight by framing influencer marketing through an ecosystemic lens, exploring how relationships among creators, brands, and audiences are sustained through interdependence rather than hierarchy. In doing so, it reframes influence as a distributed, temporal process through which marketing systems continuously adapt and co-evolve.

Chapter 2

Influencer Marketing: History and Business Mechanisms

Abstract

Influencer marketing has become a central component of contemporary brand management, yet its evolution and underlying mechanisms remain fragmented across disciplines. This chapter offers an integrative overview of influencer marketing as both a strategic tool and a culturally embedded practice. It first traces the historical shift from opinion leaders and bloggers to social media influencers and creator-entrepreneurs, showing how platforms, agencies, and brands have professionalized and scaled the field. It then synthesizes the rapidly expanding literature, mapping dominant research streams and methodologies, and clarifying how influencer effectiveness is theorized through four influencers' traits: characteristics, communicative style, congruence, and connections. Building on this, the chapter advances an ecosystemic perspective that situates influencer marketing within the broader creator economy, where commercial and social ties are increasingly intertwined and relationships are commodified. Finally, it positions livestreaming as a critical empirical field, in which influence is enacted synchronously and value is co-produced in real-time during long-lasting streaming sessions. Taken together, the chapter consolidates the state of knowledge on influencer marketing and outlines a relational agenda for future research on brands, communities, and synchronous digital environments.

2.1 Introduction

The Stanley Quencher Tumbler has become a highly sought-after accessory among Generation Z. Originally patented in 1913 as the first vacuum-insulated bottle, the Tumbler underwent a significant redesign in 2016 to align with contemporary aesthetics and functionality. Its widespread popularity can be largely attributed to social media, where viral TikTok and Instagram videos showcase influencers seamlessly integrating the tumbler into their daily routines. These videos often depict influencers coordinating the tumbler's accessories with their outfits or incorporating them into various lifestyle activities, such as workouts and shopping. This heightened visibility has led to an unprecedented surge in demand, with over one million individuals joining the company's waiting lists. The Stanley Quencher's success exemplifies influencer marketing's transformative power (Retail Drive, 2023).

Influencer marketing has become a widely used marketing communications tactic in recent years due to its efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Brands leverage the power of influential and highly popular social media users, known as social media influencers, to promote their products or services. These influencers are content creators with a large follower base on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or Twitch. They monetize their content and wield significant influence over their followers. In the early years of the internet, influencers were recognized as opinion leaders who primarily communicated with audiences through personal blogs. With the rise of social media, they expanded their reach, demonstrating effectiveness in enhancing brand awareness and fostering purchase intent by producing engaging, brand-aligned content and distributing it to their niche audiences (e.g., Han & Balabanis, 2024).

The success of influencers lies in their ability to create fun, interesting, and engaging content by combining their expertise in a particular niche (such as fashion, luxury, fitness, or gaming) with providing their followers an authentic insight into their daily lives. Recognizing their substantial influence, brands have increasingly engaged influencers as strategic partners in the advertising process (Enke & Borchers, 2021), evolving into more structured, long-term partnerships (Marketing

Charts, 2022). This success has pushed influencer marketing to a professional level, involving a diverse range of stakeholders such as management and marketing agencies, as well as regulators. Consequently, the landscape of influencer marketing has been changing rapidly.

This chapter explores the role of influencers as intermediaries between brands and consumers, providing insights into their historical evolution and their emergence as central figures within the social media landscape. Furthermore, it examines how influencers can serve as a strategic marketing tool to enhance brand engagement and consumer trust. The chapter concludes with a research agenda aimed at advancing scholarly inquiry into the role of influencers in brand management.

2.2 The Rise of Influencers in Modern Marketing

In the current digital era, social media influencers have assumed a pivotal role in content creation and online relationship-building, serving as intermediaries between brands and consumers (Schouten et al., 2020; Delbaere et al., 2021). They represent the evolution of bloggers, who originally emerged from traditional opinion leaders. Opinion leaders are individuals who influence others' attitudes and behaviors, particularly regarding purchasing decisions. Traditionally, they acted as intermediaries in the communication process between brands and consumers, leveraging mass media to exert their influence (Grau, 2022).

However, with the advent of digital technologies, opinion leaders increasingly embraced online platforms as tools for social persuasion. By the early 1990s, blogs had become a significant medium for these individuals to disseminate knowledge, establish expertise within specific fields, and engage in brand endorsements. They provided both hedonic and utilitarian value by offering entertainment and information to readers. Beyond their subject-matter expertise, these individuals distinguished themselves from the broader public by being perceived as credible and intrinsically motivated to enhance their status (Grau, 2022).

With the dawn of the 21st century, the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram provided new avenues for online opinion leaders to expand their reach, cultivate their credibility, and attain "micro-celebrity" status, thus evolving into what is now recognized as social

media influencers (Abidin, 2015). Notable examples include Mr. Beast, an American YouTuber who began creating content in 2012 and has since become one of the platform's most prominent figures, and Charli D'Amelio, who launched her TikTok career in 2019 with dance videos and became the platform's leading personality, surpassing 100 million followers. In recent years, these influencers have extended their influence beyond social media, gaining recognition in traditional entertainment sectors. For instance, D'Amelio appeared in ABC's television special "The Disney Family Singalong." Some influencers have even launched their television programs, such as Ryan Kaji, a renowned YouTube child star whose "Ryan's Mystery Playdate", a children's television series, was developed based on his highly successful YouTube channel, Ryan's World.

Today, influencers are a pivotal element of modern marketing strategies. They cultivate and maintain a personal brand while fostering an online community through the consistent creation of authentic and distinctive content (Joshi et al., 2025; Kozinets et al., 2023). Their effectiveness lies in their ability to seamlessly integrate branded content into their posts, crafting tailored advertisements and engaging videos that resonate with audiences in ways traditional celebrities often fail to achieve (Abidin, 2015; Shtern & Hill, 2021).

The strategy of engaging influencers to leverage their audience reach and engagement capabilities, widely recognized as Influencer Marketing, has transformed the digital, advertising, and marketing industries. The overarching goal is to enhance organizational performance and achieve favorable marketing and public relations outcomes, such as amplifying brand messages or driving product sales. The commercial impact of this strategy has been significant, compelling firms to increase their investments in influencer partnerships (Leung et al., 2022; Joshi et al., 2025). The influencer marketing industry is expected to reach a market size of \$32.55 billion in 2025, with the majority of brands and marketing agencies allocating more than 75% of their marketing budgets to influencer marketing as of February 2024 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025). This growing trend continues unabated, with the industry projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 33.17%, reaching an estimated \$71 billion by 2032 (Fortune Business Insights, 2025).

2.3 A Comprehensive Review of Research

Influencer marketing has garnered significant scholarly attention, with researchers employing various systematic review methods to track its evolution. Vrontis and colleagues (2021) used a domain-based selection approach, while Ye and colleagues (2021) applied bibliometric analysis to 387 peer-reviewed articles to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing literature. Hudders and colleagues (2021a) categorized influencer marketing studies using Stern's Revised Communication Model for Advertising, focusing on influencer characteristics, content strategies, and audience impact. Similarly, Leung and colleagues (2022) conducted a scoping review with thematic analysis to identify research gaps.

Recent large-scale reviews have further structured influencer marketing research. For instance, Joshi and colleagues (2025) systematically reviewed 214 academic articles (2008–2021) to establish a framework for future investigations. Fowler and Thomas (2023) applied a framework-based scoping review to analyze theoretical perspectives, research contexts, and methodological approaches, while Tanwar and colleagues (2024) conducted a bibliometric and content analysis (2011–2020), mapping key theoretical trends.

These reviews show that empirical research in influencer marketing predominantly used quantitative methodologies. Vrontis and colleagues (2021), for instance, noted that 81% of studies rely on surveys and experimental methods, often examining influencer credibility, attractiveness, and consumer behavior (Joshi et al., 2025). Regression analysis and structural equation modeling are frequently used to assess predictive factors of purchase intentions (Tanwar et al., 2024), while computational techniques, such as network analysis, sentiment analysis, and algorithm-based modeling, have been applied in 33 studies (Joshi et al., 2025).

Qualitative studies, though less common, provide deeper insights into influencer-follower dynamics, authenticity, and content strategies. Existing studies adopt multiple qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, case studies, focus groups, netnography, and content and thematic analysis (Joshi et al., 2025; Tanwar et al., 2024). Since 2018, mixed-method approaches have gained traction,

integrating qualitative interviews with quantitative methodologies to better provide an in-depth understanding of such phenomenon. Scholars encourage the adoption of this methodology to facilitate the evolution of the domain (Vrontis et al., 2021; Fowler & Thomas, 2023).

Emerging research methodologies include eye-tracking studies to measure engagement, web scraping, social media analytics to track influencer trends, and A/B testing for real-time campaign assessment (Tanwar et al., 2024; Fowler & Thomas, 2023). These advancements signal a growing interest in data-driven insights and experimental methods to enhance influencer marketing research. Spörl-Wang and colleagues (2025) conducted a meta-analytical review synthesizing insights from 93 studies to determine the primary predictors of consumer engagement and purchase intention in influencer marketing. Similarly, Han and Balabanis (2024) undertook a meta-analysis examining the antecedents and theoretical foundations of influencer impact. Pan et al. (2024) further contributed to this body of research by analyzing 251 studies, encompassing 1,531 effect sizes, to identify the key drivers of influencer marketing effectiveness. Several theoretical constructs overlap, revealing the deep interconnectedness between factors related to influencer characteristics, audience engagement, and the nature of the content created and disseminated on social media (e.g., Spörl-Wang et al., 2025).

2.3.1 Research Themes

Since 2011, influencer marketing research has evolved from defining influencers and measuring success through follower count and engagement to examining their distinct impact on brand performance (Fowler & Tomas, 2023; Hudders et al., 2021b; Leung et al., 2022). Between 2015 and 2017, scholars focused on self-branding and parasocial interactions, analyzing how influencers build trust, credibility, and emotional connections to drive consumer decisions (Hudders et al., 2021b; Joshi et al., 2025; Tanwar et al., 2024). From 2017 to 2019, attention shifted to sponsorship transparency, persuasion knowledge, and ethics, with studies highlighting the impact of advertising disclosures on consumer trust and the need for standardized regulations (Hudders et al., 2021b; Joshi et al., 2025; Leung et al., 2022).

Since 2020, research has increasingly examined platform algorithms, influencer credibility, and psychological effects on consumers (Vrontis et al., 2021; Hudders et al., 2021; Tanwar et al., 2024). While current studies focus on branding effectiveness and content creation, only 12% critically analyze influencer marketing's negative consequences, revealing a gap in research on its "dark side." Furthermore, only 39% of studies explore specific industries, with beauty, fashion, travel, and lifestyle being the most examined sectors, primarily on Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook (Tanwar et al., 2024).

Despite the expanding body of influencer marketing literature, key insights into its effectiveness from both commercial and social perspectives remain underexplored. For instance, research on influencer pricing models and cost-effectiveness is limited, as is the study of algorithm-driven influencer selection and predictive analytics for campaign success (Leung et al., 2022). Additionally, growing scholarly interest in the broader societal impact of influencers, including their influence on public opinion, mental health, and social behaviors, suggests a need for further research extending beyond the commercial domain of influencer marketing (Hudders et al., 2021a).

2.4 Mechanisms of Influence and Marketing Effectiveness

The rise of influencer marketing has transformed traditional brand communication by shifting power away from centralized advertising strategies toward decentralized, peer-to-peer communication models. While historically brands maintained significant control over messages disseminated to consumers, either through direct marketing or tightly scripted briefs given to media agencies, today they increasingly rely on influencers as intermediaries.

In this model, brands construct messages for broad dissemination, while influencers act as cultural translators that repackages and amplifies content within their communities. This transition entails a partial relinquishment of control, as brands no longer dictate exactly how content is interpreted or shared. As a result, influencers have become powerful agents in shaping consumer perceptions, driven by their social capital and affective proximity to followers (Kozinets et al, 2023).

2.4.1 Social Power and Influence

Social influence refers to the capacity to affect others' beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors, whether intentionally or unintentionally. In influencer marketing, this is intrinsically tied to social power, that is the ability to elicit behavioral change within a sphere of influence. This sphere includes both influencers' followers and the brands with which they collaborate (Kozinets et al., 2023).

In particular, influencers operate within dynamics of both normative and informational influence. Normative influence arises from followers' desire to conform and avoid social judgment, while informational influence stems from the perception that the influencer holds valuable or expert knowledge. These mechanisms (i.e. peer influence, peer pressure, and perceived expertise) position influencers as credible sources within tightly knit communities. Accordingly, their impact extends beyond commercial persuasion into cultural and behavioral shaping, particularly when they operates within a clearly defined niche.

2.4.2 The Influencers' effectiveness

Influencer marketing effectiveness refers to the extent to which influencers establish a strong, direct, and organic connection with both brands and consumers, ultimately impacting engagement, shaping consumer attitudes, and driving sales performance (Costello & Yesiloglu, 2020; Leung et al., 2022). Influencers' credibility and popularity stem both from their expertise in specific areas (such as travel, beauty, or gaming), and in their ability to offer followers an authentic insight into their private lives. They maintain closer and more interactive relationships with their followers, fostering a sense of similarity, relatability, and perceived proximity, enabling them to exert greater influence and achieve higher effectiveness (Sammis et al., 2015). In fact, empirical studies demonstrate that influencer-driven marketing strategies are more effective than traditional advertising approaches or conventional celebrity endorsements, whereby companies used to leverage the perceived credibility, attractiveness, and reputation of celebrities to promote their brands (Grau, 2022; Leung et al., 2022; De Jans et al., 2020; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

This effectiveness can be delineated into two primary outcomes. First, transactional effectiveness pertains to the direct impact on sales and purchase behavior (Pan et al., 2024; Vrontis et al., 2021).

Second, non-transactional effectiveness encompasses broader consumer outcomes, such as shaping consumer preferences, attitudes, and intentions (Leung et al., 2022; Costello et al., 2020). This dimension includes influencer marketing's impact on brand awareness, attitudes toward advertisements, brand perception, product perception, customer engagement intentions, purchase intentions, and engagement behaviors (Spörl-Wang et al., 2025).

Hence, influencers act as intermediary role between brands and consumers (Delbaere et al, 2021) generating value by providing both community-oriented and commercial content while leveraging personal characteristics. The powerful nature of these attributes can be explained by different psychological and social mechanisms (e.g., Han & Balabanis, 2024; Pan et al., 2024), that can be grouped into four factors (4Cs): influencers' personal characteristics (Characteristics), their alignment with brands and followers (Congruence), their distinctive communication styles (Communication), and the relationships they cultivate with audience (Connections). Figure 2 presents a comprehensive visual representation of this process.

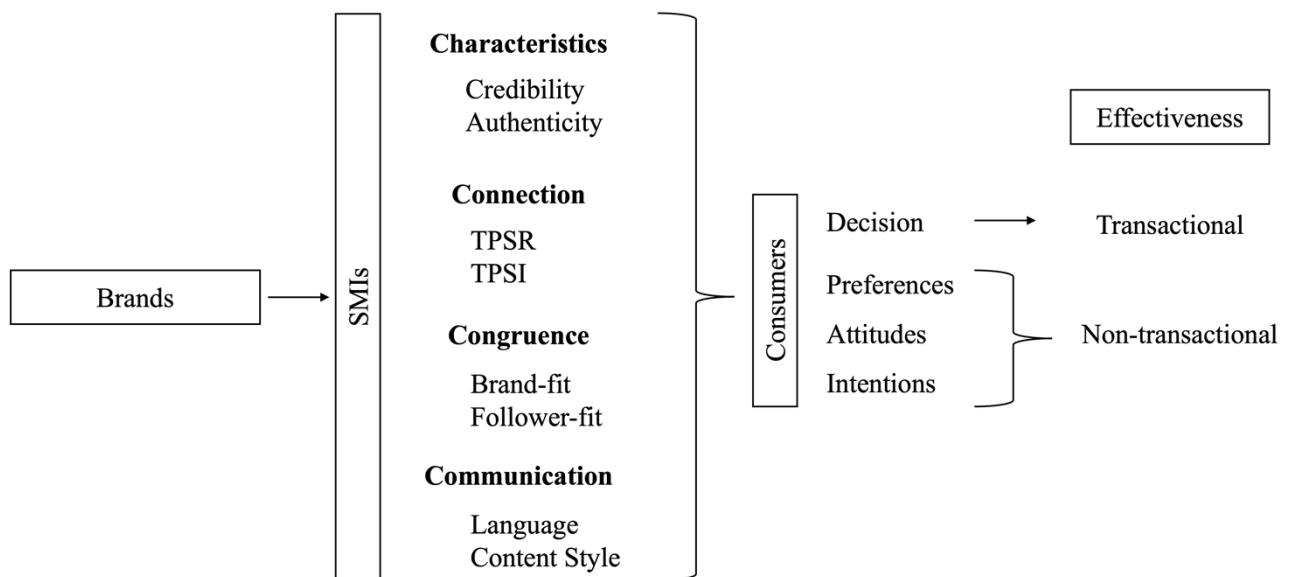


Figure 2 4Cs of Influencers Impacting Effectiveness

Characteristics: Credibility and Authenticity

Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) has been identified as a critical determinant of both transactional and non-transactional outcomes, exerting a profound influence on overall effectiveness (Han & Balabanis, 2024). Source credibility refers to the characteristics of

communicators that affect the receivers' acceptance of a message, determined by three key dimensions: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). Expertise pertains to an influencer's perceived knowledge and competence in a specific domain. Trustworthiness relates to an influencer's perceived honesty, reliability, and integrity, influencing whether consumers perceive their endorsements as genuine. Attractiveness extends beyond physical appearance to encompass likability, relatability, and the influencer's ability to resonate with their audience (Ohanian, 1990). Research indicates that influencers who score highly in these dimensions significantly enhance consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Pan et al., 2024). Han and Balabanis (2024) further indicate that the impact of source credibility depends on product category choices, with trustworthiness being a stronger predictor for hedonic products, while expertise is more effective for utilitarian products.

The success of social media influencers, however, lies in their talent to combine expertise with authenticity. Although influencers are highly professionalized and become expert in a particular niche, it is their talent to bring content in an authentic way that explains their huge success (Aw & Agnihotri, 2024; Audrezet et al., 2020). Authenticity refers to the perception that an individual behaves by their true self (Moulard et al., 2015). In the context of influencer marketing, it represents the degree to which an influencer appears trustworthy and genuine in their presence and content (Kim & Kim, 2021). Parallels can be drawn with traditional marketing and communication principles, such as personal branding, strategic communication, self-presentation, and advertorial campaigns (Joshi et al., 2025). The perception of authenticity is cultivated through a deliberate balancing act, a phenomenon termed "calibrated amateurism", where influencers curate a mix of both edited and raw content, enabling them to maintain a professional image while being perceived as genuine and relatable by their audience (Abidin, 2017). This balance extends to self-disclosure and transparency, namely the extent to which influencers share personal information, experiences, and opinions with their followers, which can be strategically planned.

Audrezet et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study analyzing influencer-brand partnerships, identifying two key strategies through which influencers communicate their authenticity, namely transparency and passion. Specifically, they argue that influencers demonstrate passionate authenticity when they create content that is inherently enjoyable and hedonic, while transparent authenticity is evident when influencers explicitly disclose sponsorships in informational content. Therefore, in communicating authenticity, influencers need to be intrinsically driven and transparent with their follower, even in disclosing a partnership. Research indicates that when followers recognize an influencer's endorsement as a commercial tactic, they may become skeptical and resistant to persuasion (Ye et al., 2021). The Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) has been widely used to explain such responses. For instance, Spörl-Wang et al. (2025) investigated how sponsorship disclosure impacts consumer trust and engagement, finding that explicit disclosure can negatively affect purchase intention. However, if influencers maintain strong authenticity and credibility, the adverse effects of disclosure can be mitigated (Lou, 2022). This aligns with Hughes and colleagues (2019), who suggest that when consumers perceive value in influencer content, whether through informative utility or hedonic enjoyment, they are less likely to activate persuasion knowledge. In such cases, influencer marketing remains effective as audiences perceive the content as providing useful information and an enjoyable experience (Pan et al., 2024).

In sum, influencers are expected to provide honest opinions, explain personal viewpoints, and exhibit intrinsic motivation and passion in their endeavors. Consequently, they are often regarded as more authentic than traditional celebrities, as they offer unbiased perspectives and demonstrate a genuine commitment to their niche topics and the personalized experiences of their followers (Pan et al., 2024; Audrezet et al., 2020), revealing the importance of communicate with followers in a transparent manner.

In essence, an authentic influencer is perceived as more credible, leading to increased influence on consumer behaviors and positive brand outcomes (Audrezet et al., 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2024). The higher perceived authenticity is strongly correlated with influencer credibility, fostering positive

sentiments such as trust, familiarity, and friendship, enhancing followers' sense of closeness and admiration, augmenting influencers' capacity to influence consumer behavior and drive brand loyalty (Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024).

Communication: Language and Content Style

The communication style of influencers encompasses their interaction strategies, linguistic choices, visual aesthetics, and content themes. According to Pan and colleagues (2024), influencer communication exerts a significant effect on purchase intention due to its unique combination of direct interaction and perceived personal relationships. In particular, followers' sense of closeness and intimacy with influencers plays a crucial role in shaping the impact of content. For example, Farivar and colleagues (2021) found that storytelling-based posts (where influencers share personal narratives rather than solely promoting products) are more engaging and persuasive for followers compared to purely informational content. Similarly, the visual presence and image of influencers influence marketing effectiveness. Jin and colleagues (2019) conducted an experimental study demonstrating that followers perceive brands as more credible and develop more favorable attitudes when influencers appear in sponsored posts rather than when only the product is shown. Expanding on this, Spörl-Wang and colleagues (2025) emphasized that an influencer's language style, specifically their expressive and personalized communication, fosters psychological closeness, thereby enhancing consumer engagement. Their research further highlights that content style also significantly impacts consumer responses: when influencers provide utilitarian content (i.e., informational or functional value), it has a stronger influence on purchase intention; whereas hedonic content (i.e., emotionally engaging or experiential) is more effective in fostering audience interaction and engagement (Spörl-Wang et al., 2025).

Congruence: Brand and Follower Fit

Influencer congruence refers to the degree of alignment between an influencer and the brand, product, and audience (Kim & Kim, 2021). Congruity theory posits that individuals seek cognitive consistency when evaluating messages and opinions (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). The greater the perceived

congruence, the more favorable the evaluation. Accordingly, when a person shares a message that resonates with the audience's values and beliefs, it is more likely to be persuasive and well-received. Conversely, an incongruent message may be perceived as less persuasive and evaluated more negatively (Han & Balabanis, 2024). This characteristic is essential for brands seeking to optimize influencer partnerships, as selecting the right influencer hinges on achieving a strategic fit between the product and the intended target audience. For this reason, several distinctions have been made to facilitate the brand-fit process.

Traditionally, influencers have been categorized either by their specialization in a particular niche or by the size of their audience. The former categorization pertains to influencers' expertise in specific fields, which is crucial in assessing the congruence between a sponsored brand and the influencer's identity. Influencers may be classified as vertical (or "monomorphic") influencers, who focus on a single domain, or horizontal (or "polymorphic") influencers, who engage across multiple industries. Their expertise may center on a particular product category (e.g., beauty, gaming) or a broader industry (e.g., travel) (Grau, 2022).

On the other hand, quantitative attributes of an influencer's account, such as follower count and audience composition, often serve as key indicators for brand in determining the congruence. Influencers are categorized based on follower count: celebrity and mega influencers have over one million followers, macro influencers range from 100,000 to one million, micro-influencers from 10,000 to 100,000, and nano influencers have fewer than 10,000 followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Research suggests that as follower count decreases, perceived authenticity and accessibility increase. Micro and nano influencers enable marketers to reach niche audiences, whereas mega and macro influencers are more effective in generating widespread brand awareness. This aligns with previous studies, such as De Vries' (2019) experimental research, which revealed that an excessive follower count may diminish influencer credibility, thereby reducing effectiveness. Similarly, De Veirman and colleagues (2017) emphasized the necessity of striking an optimal balance in both follower and followee numbers to maintain trustworthiness and endorsement efficacy. Specifically,

they suggested that high follower counts coupled with a low number of followers may indicate fake accounts or excessive focus on brand collaborations. These results shed lights on the pivotal role of congruence within the triad brand-influencer-follower.

In fact, existing research substantiates the importance of influencer congruence, with either brands and followers, for marketing outcomes. For instance, the survey study by Torres and colleagues (2019) revealed that influencer-brand congruence can predict brand attitudes, and subsequently, purchase intentions from followers. The study further showed that a higher perceived follower attractiveness contributed to perceptions of brand congruity. Additionally, Vrontis and colleagues (2021) emphasized the critical role of influencer-brand congruence in fostering trust and shaping brand perception, further reinforcing its impact on credibility. To maximize effectiveness, influencers should align their personal brand, values, and expertise with the endorsed brand, thereby enhancing perceived authenticity and increasing follower purchase intention (Kim & Kim, 2021). Beyond influencer-brand alignment, congruence between influencers and their followers is equally vital. Research by Belanche and colleagues (2021) found that when there is high influencer-consumer congruence, this similarity enhances the congruence between the consumer and the product, leading to higher purchase intentions and recommendations. Such alignment is built on shared values, habits, and preferences, fostering a more authentic and meaningful connection with the audience, and highlighting the significance of similarity and homophily (e.g., Freberg et al., 2011; Russell, 2020). As a consequence, brands must carefully select influencers whose audience demographics align with their target market and especially considering the kind of relationship there are able to establish with their followers.

Connection: Transparasocial Relationships and Interaction

Originally conceptualized by Horton & Wohl (1956), parasocial relationship theory described the sense of intimacy audiences developed toward television personalities due to repeated unidirectional exposure. In the social media era, this concept has been adapted to capture the relationships followers develop with influencers. Compared to the one-directional parasocial relationships developed in

traditional media, the reciprocal and interactive nature of influencer-follower relationships has led to the emergence of a new concept, namely trans-parasocial relationships (Lou, 2022). Trans-parasocial relationships exhibit three defining characteristics: (1) they are collectively reciprocal, as influencers engage with their audiences as a whole; (2) they are (a)synchronously interactive, depending on the extent to which audiences can provide timely feedback to influence content; and (3) they have a co-creative nature, as influencers and followers collaborate in shaping content, in fact through the reciprocal engagement, followers may perceive themselves as active contributors to an influencer's success, thereby enhancing their participation and loyalty (Abidin, 2015; Lou, 2022; Leung et al., 2022).

Studies have explored how influencers strategically manage these relationships to strengthen their personal brands, underscoring the importance of relationship management in sustaining audience engagement and trust (Joshi et al., 2025). Attractiveness and perceived similarity (homophily) serve as underlying psychological mechanisms reinforcing parasocial relationships. Consequently, brands can leverage influencers' pre-existing interactions and credibility within their target demographics to build deeper consumer relationships. Importantly, parasocial relationships are more effective than opinion leadership in driving purchase intentions, highlighting the pivotal role of the social aspect of influencer marketing (Farivar et al., 2021). Unlike traditional media figures, social media influencers break the "fourth wall", i.e. the conceptual barrier separating media figures from audiences (Ballantine & Martin, 2005) by directly engaging with their followers through comments, live interactions, and personal disclosures (Kim & Kim, 2023; Abidin, 2015). This interaction fosters a collective sense of community, perceived friendship, and similarity (Kowert & Daniel, 2021), leading to increased interest in endorsed products (Yuan & Lou, 2020).

The concept of parasocial relationships (PSRs) originates from mass media studies, where Horton & Wohl (1956) first defined it as the illusionary bond that viewers develop with media personas, such as fictional characters. With technological advancements, research has expanded to examine how audiences form varying degrees of PSRs, ranging from friendships to romantic attachments, mirroring

real-life social interactions (Tukachinsky, 2010). Furthermore, scholars have explored the ways in which PSRs can take on familial roles, even extending to the notion of "parakin", a deep emotional connection akin to kinship (Yan et al., 2023).

2.5 The Ecosystem of Influencer Marketing

This ecosystemic view positions influencer marketing as a relational and systemic configuration rather than a linear communication channel. Influencers act as connectors who sustain the flow of meaning and value between brands, audiences, platforms, and intermediaries. Their actions generate visibility for brands, traffic for platforms, and symbolic capital for communities.

The creator economy can thus be defined as “an internet-facilitated economy that allows individuals to create content, grow an audience, and monetize it by generating some sort of revenue” (Peres et al., 2024, p. 404). While traditional creative industries centralized production within advertising, television, or publishing (Grau, 2022), digital environments have decentralized creativity, allowing users to act simultaneously as producers and consumers. This hybridization blurs not only the distinction between amateur and professional but also between commercial and social exchange, making relationality the core infrastructure of the system.

From this perspective, influencer marketing becomes both a cultural and economic ecosystem: a distributed environment in which value circulates through affective ties, technological affordances, and economic mechanisms. Understanding influence, therefore, requires attention to the temporal, emotional, and structural interdependencies that hold this system together.

2.5.1 From Influence to Relation: The Networked Nature of Influence

Influencers have become the backbone of the contemporary creator economy, a multifaceted system that enables the commercialization of digital content and the circulation of attention as a form of capital (Kozinets et al., 2023; Peres et al., 2024; Libai et al., 2025). Within this economy, influencers, brands, platforms, and agencies co-produce value through the continuous negotiation of visibility, engagement, and authenticity. What initially emerged as an individual practice of online self-branding

has evolved into an ecosystemic configuration, grounded in the interplay between economic exchange and affective connection.

While influencers are widely recognized as key agents of persuasion, their impact cannot be fully understood without examining the network of relationships they cultivate, manage, and commodify. As Kozinets et al. (2023) note, the sphere of influence surrounding them encompasses both commercial collaborations and community-based connections. Relationships with followers often originate as expressions of affinity and shared interests but progressively acquire economic value as they are translated into measurable engagement, visibility, and loyalty. In this sense, influencer marketing exemplifies the commodification of social relationships, where intimacy, trust, and participation are transformed into tradable assets within digital markets.

Marketing research has traditionally distinguished between commercial and social relationships (Roy Bhattacharjee et al., 2022). Commercial ties link consumers and brands through exchange, trust, and satisfaction; social ties, instead, emerge among community members through shared goals, emotional support, and mutual recognition. In the influencer context, these two domains overlap, as creators simultaneously cultivate brand partnerships and community relations. Their value resides precisely in this interstitial space: they bridge social and economic spheres, converting engagement into symbolic and financial capital.

2.5.2 The Commercial Layer

Collaborations between brands and influencers have become a structural component of the digital economy. What began as sporadic partnerships aimed at generating visibility has evolved into a complex system of long-term relationships that integrate creative, strategic, and relational dimensions. Influencers no longer act as amplifiers of predesigned messages but as co-producers of meaning, where their aesthetic, narrative, and community identity becomes an extension of the brand's symbolic capital.

From a managerial standpoint, influencer partnerships enable brands to access niche audiences, strengthen positioning, and build trust through personalized storytelling (Leung et al., 2022; Vrontis

et al., 2021). From a cultural perspective, however, these collaborations involve a constant negotiation of control and authenticity: while brands aim for consistency and measurable returns, influencers must preserve autonomy and credibility. This tension between coordination and creativity defines much of the influencer economy (Kozinets et al., 2023).

A well-documented example is Olay's *Fearless 9* campaign (2018), which invited nine creators, including Denise Bidot, Nabela Noor, and Lily Singh, to document their skincare journey through a 28-day challenge that culminated in a make-up-free event. By encouraging women to "face anything," Olay transformed skincare into a discourse of confidence and self-acceptance, achieving both symbolic resonance and measurable engagement. This illustrates how influencer campaigns depend on the alignment between commercial objectives and personal storytelling, translating brand values into culturally meaningful expressions.

While the specific formats vary (e.g. sponsored posts, giveaways, brand ambassadorships, or event collaborations) they all rely on the influencer's ability to humanize corporate communication. Sponsored posts offer immediacy but limited relational depth; giveaways stimulate participation but rarely sustain loyalty; ambassadorships cultivate continuity and trust, turning influencers into long-term brand partners. Today, influencer marketing is not a peripheral tactic but a central mechanism in the communication mix. Campaign content is repurposed across media and often mediated by agencies and talent networks that coordinate contracts, deliverables, and compliance (Peres et al., 2024). These commercial exchanges, however, are not purely transactional. They depend on sustained trust, reciprocity, and mutual benefit, functioning as microcosms of the broader influencer ecosystem: interdependent networks where value emerges from collaboration and the performance of authenticity.

2.5.3 The Social Layer

If commercial collaborations form the economic backbone of influencer marketing, social relationships constitute its connective tissue. Long before the advent of social media, consumers gathered in shared spaces to exchange meanings and emotions, forming what Consumer Culture

Theory has conceptualized as subcultures of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), consumer tribes (Cova, 1997), and brand communities (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

Digital platforms have extended these communal forms into networked environments, where audiences actively participate in meaning-making processes. Within these spaces, influencers operate as opinion leaders, mediators, and micro-celebrities (Hudders et al, 2021a; Kim & Kim, 2023). Communities emerge around shared passions or lifestyles, but what sustains them is not simply interest—it is the emotional and symbolic sense of belonging, the feeling of “we-ness” that binds members together (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

These online communities reproduce mechanisms typical of face-to-face interaction—rituals, humor, and mutual support, while also generating new forms of intimacy shaped by visibility and algorithmic proximity. The classic notion of parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956) has evolved from a one-sided illusion to partially reciprocal interactions, where followers comment, respond, and co-create content (Abidin, 2015; Chen, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2023). Lou (2022) defines these new relational forms as trans-parasocial relationships (TPSRs), hybrid, co-creative, and collective in nature. TPSRs are characterized by collective reciprocity (community-wide engagement rather than one-to-one exchanges), (a)synchronous interactivity (depending on real-time feedback), and co-creation (shared meaning-making between influencer and audience).

Through these dynamics, audiences shift from passive spectators to active participants within the influencer’s ecosystem, producing both affective and algorithmic capital. Their interactions (comments, reactions, donations) fuel visibility metrics and sustain platform circulation. In this way, the boundary between social and commercial domains becomes increasingly blurred: the emotional investments of followers acquire measurable value, and sociality itself becomes monetized.

2.5.4 The Commodification and Professionalization of Relationships

The influencer thus emerges as both entrepreneur and relational mediator, whose livelihood depends on maintaining a delicate equilibrium between intimacy and monetization. Their income sources—brand sponsorships, platform-based revenues, product sales, subscriptions, and crowdfunding—

reflect the hybrid nature of this work (Goanta, 2021). Each revenue stream depends on the intensity of social bonds: casual followers are reached through visibility, active fans engage through participation, and “super fans” provide direct and sustained financial support. Sustaining these relational tiers requires continuous attention, interaction, and emotional labor (Baym, 2018).

Edeling and Weis (2024) identify four primary business models that encapsulate this professionalization: niche community model, built around small, loyal audiences united by specific passions (e.g., gaming, food, crafts); ephemeral opportunity model, based on viral or trend-driven exposure, typical of short-form content creators; launchpad model, where online visibility becomes entrepreneurial capital (e.g., Chiara Ferragni’s transition to brand founder); leapfrogged celebrity model, where traditional celebrities leverage social media to extend their reach and personal brand (e.g., Selena Gomez, Cristiano Ronaldo).

Across all models, relationships remain both the resource and the product. Trust, authenticity, and responsiveness become currencies within an economy where emotional and temporal investments are continuously monetized. These relational economies form the foundation of what can be conceptualized as a broader influencer ecosystem—an interconnected field of actors, technologies, and exchanges where relationships themselves function as the infrastructure of value creation.

2.6 Livestreaming as a Synchronous Ecosystem

Within this ecosystemic logic, livestreaming represents a critical empirical frontier. Unlike the asynchronous nature of most influencer content, livestreaming unfolds in real time, collapsing the boundaries between production and participation. Here, relational and temporal dimensions converge: streamers perform, interact, and build community synchronously, transforming visibility into lived presence.

Studies on parasocial and trans-parasocial relationships (Lou, 2022; Kowert & Daniel, 2021) demonstrate how streaming amplifies intimacy, reciprocity, and identification. Streamers orchestrate engagement through direct chat interactions, visual feedback, and personalized responses, fostering affective attachment and financial participation (Chen, 2021; McLaughlin & Wohn, 2021; Speed et

al., 2023). Donations exemplify the monetization of connection: audiences remunerate not only content but also the sense of relational closeness.

Livestreaming thus exposes the economic foundations of relational labor (Baym, 2018) and makes visible the pressures of social acceleration (Rosa, 2013) intensified by platform logics (Cunningham & Craig, 2021). The constant demand for immediacy, availability, and authenticity transforms presence into both a form of capital and a source of exhaustion (Duffy, 2017).

Ultimately, the evolution of livestreaming and eSports marks the convergence of entertainment and marketing into a shared experiential domain, where streamers operate as performers of real-time influence. This transition, from asynchronous influence to synchronous performance, signals a broader cultural shift from mediated communication to lived interaction.

The following chapter explores this transformation in depth, examining how streamers operate as under conditions of synchrony, where the simultaneity of production and reception reconfigures how commercial and relational value are negotiated.

Having established the ecosystemic nature of influencer marketing, the discussion now shifts from structure to performance. If ecosystems reveal how value flows among interdependent actors, livestreaming exposes how such value is enacted in time. The following chapter, therefore, focuses on livestreaming as a site of synchronous influence, examining how creators negotiate presence, spontaneity, and commercial integration when no separation exists between production and interaction. Through this lens, improvisation becomes not merely a creative tactic but a temporal labor through which streamers sustain engagement and translate uncertainty into continuous participation.

Chapter 3

Endurance Improvisation and Temporal Strategies in Livestreaming

Abstract

Livestreaming is reshaping digital communication, challenging traditional models of influencer marketing. Unlike pre-recorded formats, it collapses the boundary between content and interaction, requiring streamers to manage advertising under continuous temporal, emotional, and commercial pressure. This study investigates a critical question: how do streamers integrate brand messages when nothing can be paused, edited, or pre-scripted? Drawing on in-depth interviews and netnographic observations, we conceptualize endurance improvisation as the streamers' capability to absorb uncertainty without compromising audience engagement. We identify four archetypes of endurance improvisation (Guru, Host, Master, and Showman) each reflecting a distinct approach to combining content, interaction, and advertising in live contexts. To explain these styles, we introduce a temporal framework based on Aion (durational presence), Chronos (structured, measurable time), and Kairos (situational, opportunity-driven time). Our findings show that each archetype enacts a unique configuration of these temporal modes to sustain visibility, foster intimacy, and align brand integration with audience expectations. Practically, the framework offers advertisers new criteria for evaluating streamer suitability beyond surface-level metrics, focusing instead on the fit between performance style and temporal strategy. For streamers, it provides guidance on how managing Aion, Chronos, and Kairos can reduce fatigue, protect authenticity, and support long-term brand collaborations. By advancing endurance improvisation and temporal strategies as core mechanisms of livestreaming performance, this study opens a research agenda at the intersection of time, performance, and brand collaboration in synchronous media.

3.1 Introduction

When nothing can be paused, edited, or scripted, how do creators integrate advertising in real-time? This is the defining challenge of livestreaming, a format that collapses production and interaction into the same moment and forces promotional content to be integrated in real-time. Unlike traditional one-way formats such as television or curated influencer campaigns, livestreaming leaves no space for revision: brand messages should emerge live, embedded in the creators' unpredictable performance (Xu et al., 2022).

This immediacy places livestreaming at the frontier of influencer marketing but also exposes its limits. Current classifications of digital creators distinguish between content creators, who emphasize distinctive platform-native production, and influencers, who build personal brands and cultivate parasocial intimacy (Kozinets et al., 2023). These categories have proven effective in asynchronous environments, where content delivery and brand messages can be deliberately controlled (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Indeed, influencer marketing has expanded into a multi-billion-dollar industry (Leung et al., 2022; Craig & Cunningham, 2019), where these formats enable advertising to preserve consistency, credibility, and strategic timing (Han & Balabanis, 2024). Livestreaming, however, disrupts this logic by introducing synchrony, a structural conditions whereby people can shared the same moment in time even not the same space (Hrastinski, 2008). Hence, streamers perform and persuade continuously, often for hours, weaving together entertainment, community interaction, and advertising activities within the same unscripted performance (Sjöblom et al., 2019; Chen, 2021; Lin et al., 2021). This dimension of real-time improvisation is dramatically capturing both businesses' and academia's attention, extended the live technologies in different digital context.

While livestreaming e-commerce has attracted growing attention in advertising research, especially in East Asian markets where direct selling dominates, less is known about non-transactional livestreaming contexts, such as gaming, co-working, or entertainment, where the goal is not immediate conversion, but sustained engagement, trust, and flow (e.g. Elsholiha et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2024). A few studies have examined the improvisational traits and adjustment practices streamers

adopt to integrate advertising (e.g. Wu et al, 2023; Wu & Ham, 2025), but they portray them as strategic adaptations aimed at optimizing sales and platform rewards rather than sustained advertising strategies. As a result, the dynamics of advertising integration in non-sales-driven formats remain unexplored, leaving a gap in our understanding of how brands can leverage livestreaming beyond immediate purchase outcomes.

To fill these gaps, the current study explores this context, guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do streamers perform under the real-time, prolonged exposure conditions of livestreaming?

RQ2: What strategies do streamers use to structure interaction and content delivery in synchronous settings?

RQ3: How are advertising messages integrated into streamers' strategies?

We adopt a qualitative methodology combining netnographic observation and in-depth interviews with streamers, agencies, and viewers active on Twitch. This approach frames livestreaming not as a static content, but as a dynamic, improvisational performance shaped by temporal strategies. We introduce the concept of endurance improvisation, the ability to sustain presence and engagement over extended sessions, navigating the ongoing flow of unscripted activity. In doing so, we identify four archetypes (Guru, Host, Master, and Showman) that reflect distinct temporal strategies and advertising approach. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and managerial implications of this framework for understanding brand–streamer fit in synchronous media environments.

3.2 Literature review

3.2.1 Livestreaming as synchronous media

Livestreaming has emerged as one of the most distinctive forms of digital communication, defined by its core feature of liveness, the real-time co-presence of creator and audience (Plangger et al., 2021). Unlike pre-recorded formats, livestreaming includes production and consumption into the same temporal frame, transforming how audiences experience media and how creators perform. This synchronous condition introduces affordances such as immediacy, unpredictability, and interactivity

(Buckley et al., 2025), whereby engagement unfolds moment by moment through chat responses, visual cues, and spontaneous feedback.

Since its early diffusion through platforms like Justin.tv and Twitch (Taylor, 2018), livestreaming has expanded across multiple domains, gaming, lifestyle, education, and entertainment, becoming a pervasive infrastructure for real-time participation (Craig & Cunningham, 2019). Marketing research has recognized its persuasive potential: live formats enhance brand salience, viewer retention, and purchase intention by fostering a sense of proximity and authenticity (Wymer et al., 2021; Elsholih et al., 2023). Such immediacy does not simply enhance interactivity but reconfigures presence as a medium through which social relations and brand meanings are shaped. It thus invites audiences to engage in co-presence as a cultural act: being there together, witnessing the ordinary and the unscripted, becomes a shared ritual that transforms visibility into a sense of belonging (Couldry, 2004; Jodén & Strandell, 2022).

While livestreaming can be used for direct selling, as in livestream commerce, it also operates in non-transactional contexts such as gaming, co-working, or entertainment, where the primary goal is not conversion but the maintenance of attention, trust, and flow (Jiang et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2023). These non-sales-oriented environments foreground a different form of activity based on ongoing participation and affective continuity. Here, streamers are not simply producing content but orchestrating a temporal experience that binds audiences and brands into the same unfolding moment. In this sense, livestreaming disrupts the established logic of digital marketing, which has traditionally operated through asynchronous control based on planning, editing, scheduling, and releasing (Audrezet et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2024). Real-time environments, instead, privilege responsiveness, improvisation, and continuity over strategy and segmentation, thereby undermining the very possibility of exercising control. To understand how synchrony affects the influencer marketing industry, including both the activities of creators and the ones of brands, it is necessary to first situate streamers within the broader environment of influencer marketing, clarifying their main driver and the kind of work they perform under the pressures of synchrony.

3.2.2 Rethinking creators: framing streamers in influencer marketing

With the rise of social media and the evolution of the internet, new digital activities emerged, ranging from user-generated content (UGC) to more engaged and monetized practices (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). This conceptualization has expanded the term *creator* to include a wide range of digital actors, bloggers, vloggers, gamers, and streamers (Craig & Cunningham, 2019; Peres et al., 2024). On one hand, this inclusivity is advantageous, as it gathers under one umbrella the multiplicity of practices defining the creator economy, providing a comprehensive category for these new “creatpreneurs” (Edeling & Weis, 2024). On the other hand, it obscures the heterogeneity of creators’ activities, audiences, and commercial orientations, failing to account for the diversity of engagement, creativity, and monetization approaches that characterize the current digital landscape. Within influencer marketing research, the most prominent and theorized figures are content creators and influencers, whose overlapping definitions reflect the simultaneous rise of the creator economy and influencer marketing (Craig & Cunningham, 2019). The former are described as the engines of the ecosystem, enabling individuals to produce content, grow an audience, and monetize it (Peres et al., 2024). Influencer marketing, conversely, refers to strategies that compensate individuals for producing and promoting content on behalf of brands, leveraging the trust and proximity developed with followers (Grau, 2022). Accordingly, content creators are “*individuals who leverage digital platforms and tools to produce and share content that engages and builds an audience*” (Edeling & Weis, 2024, p.346), whereas influencers are those who establish a follower base and receive benefits for exerting influence over them (Delbaere et al., 2021; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). In simplified terms, influencers are paid for the endorsement they produce, while content creators are paid for the content they create (Peres et al., 2024).

In practice, however, the distinction is blurred. For example, influencers are often referred to as content creators (Peres et al., 2024; Ouvrein et al., 2021), particularly when co-creating content with communities or brands (Enke & Borchers, 2021).

In the marketing domain, Kozinets et al. (2023) differentiate the two figures according to their branding focus. Content creators engage in social media content branding, emphasizing originality, quality, and aesthetic coherence, often monetized through distinctive production. Influencers, in contrast, emphasize personal brand strategy, performing authenticity and emotional resonance to attract and retain audiences (Khamis et al., 2017). Their activity revolves around the construction of an authentic performance rather than a product-centered output, seeking to nurture long-term community bonds rather than one-time exchanges (Kozinets et al., 2023).

As advertising practices evolved, creators began to function as third-party endorsers producing content that integrates brand experiences into their narratives (Joshi et al., 2025). In this respect, influencers became those creators who embed advertorials and sponsored messages into their content streams (Abidin, 2015; Shtern & Hill, 2021). Regardless of definitional nuances, creators play a pivotal role in an ecosystem built on commercial relationships, mediating between brands and audiences (Vrontis et al., 2021) and, at times, substituting traditional advertising agencies (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). Their ability to shape tastes, preferences, and affective orientations (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Lin et al., 2021), deliver tailored messages (Hudders et al., 2021b; Rundin & Colliander, 2021), and sustain long-term relationships (Abidin, 2015; Lou, 2022) consolidates their centrality within the marketing and media ecosystem.

3.2.3 Streamers as Hybrid Performers

Within this spectrum, streamers represent a distinctive yet under-theorized category.

Traditionally included within the broad notion of creators (Craig & Cunningham, 2019), they have been studied primarily within specific domains such as gaming (Sjöblom, 2019; Xu et al., 2022) and e-commerce (Zhang et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2022; Kang et al., 2021), with fewer works focusing on their role in social, travel, or “In Real Life” (IRL) contexts (Deng et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2023). Depending on the analytical focus, they have alternately been described as content producers (Lee et al., 2023; Sjöblom et al., 2019; Kunigita et al., 2023) or community influencers (Yang et al., 2023; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019; Kowert & Daniel, 2021). Yet these categorizations

fail to capture the synchronous and performative intensity of livestreaming, where production and persuasion collapse into a single temporal frame. Streamers operate at the intersection of what Abidin (2015, 2017) defines as communicative intimacies and what Kozinets et al. (2023) term a consistent flow of content. Their work integrates content creation and audience engagement into a continuous, real-time performance that unfolds through improvisation, relational responsiveness, and fatigue.

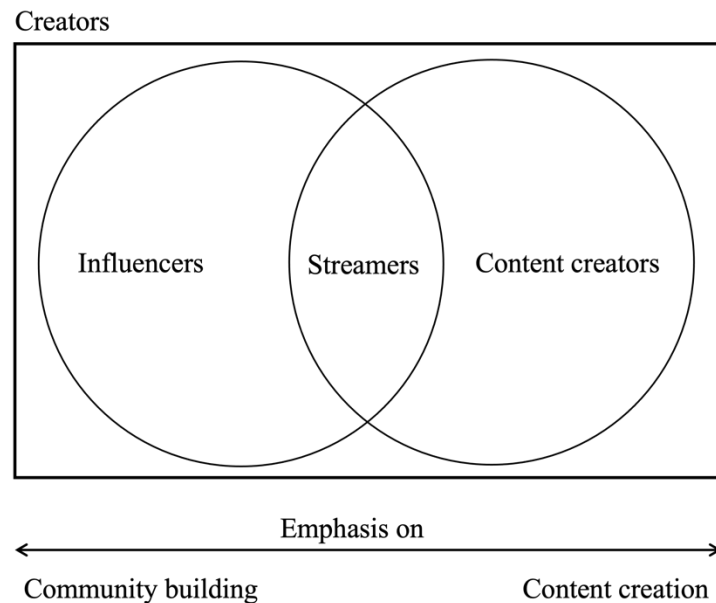


Figure 3 Framing streamers, influencers and content creators based on Kozinets et al. (2023) and Cunningham and Craig (2021).

To situate them conceptually, the framework by Kozinets et al. (2023) places content creators and influencers as opposite poles: the former prioritizing distinctive production, the latter emphasizing personal brand and relational influence. Streamers, however, embody both dimensions (Figure 3).

Before going live, they act as content creators, preparing materials according to brand or agency guidelines, whether through scripting or spontaneous design. During the broadcast, they perform as influencers, balancing entertainment, communication, and commercial cues while responding to real-time audience feedback. After the session, they manage communities, curate highlights, and maintain cross-platform engagement. This fluid movement between roles exemplifies the hybrid labor of streaming, a practice that combines aesthetic production, social interaction, and market mediation within a single temporal continuity (Wu & Ham, 2025).

Ultimately, streamers embody a form of digital work where artistic creativity, sociality, and commercialization converge (Duffy, 2017). Whether showcasing gameplay, product reviews, or everyday routines, they engage in co-produced experiences that unfold as live narratives (Sjöblom et al., 2019; Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). Their ability to improvise in synchrony with audiences, creatively adapt branded content, and sustain emotional presence marks them as hybrid performers, redefining the temporal rules of influencer marketing (Wu et al., 2023; Wu & Ham, 2025).

3.2.4 Advertising in Livestreaming Environments

Livestreaming has become a crucial site for the transformation of digital advertising, offering brands a medium where persuasion is not staged but lived. Unlike traditional influencer marketing, where advertising can be scheduled and posted, livestreaming embeds the commercial message within an ongoing flow of social interaction. Here, promotion unfolds as a situated performance in which the streamer must negotiate meaning and legitimacy moment by moment (Yan et al., 2023; Buckley et al., 2025).

A key factor shaping this environment is the evolving reward structure. Platforms increasingly incentivize streamers through built-in monetization tools such as subscriptions, tipping, and donations, often linked to audience participation (Deng et al., 2022; Jhang-Li & Liou, 2024). In response, streamers adapt their behavior strategically, a phenomenon conceptualized as “streamer adjustment” (Wu & Ham, 2025). This includes extending broadcast duration, increasing streaming frequency, and enhancing content quality, all aimed at maximizing visibility and income while integrating revenue-generating activities seamlessly into the live experience (Kunigita et al., 2023; Jhang-Li & Liou, 2024).

The constant need to adjust content, tone, format, and delivery to maintain both engagement and monetization demands more than effort. Livestreaming requires spontaneous responsiveness (Buckley et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2023), making it a distinctive form of improvised performance (Ciborra, 1999; Vera & Crossan, 2004). Hence, advertising effectiveness cannot be reduced to message retention or click-through metrics. It depends on how successfully the branded element is

woven into the affective and temporal fabric of the livestream or, in other words, how streamers can seamlessly integrate it into their improvised performances.

3.2.5 Toward the typology construction: Improvisation and Temporal Pressure in Livestreaming

Improvisation can be defined as the spontaneous emergence of thoughts and actions in response to unfolding events and unpredictable circumstances (Ciborra, 1999). In the context of livestreaming, it serves as a core mechanism for navigating synchrony, enabling creators to engage in situated acts of meaning-making (Vera & Crossan, 2004). Livestreaming compels creators to “perform it on the spur of the moment” (Ciborra, 1999), through a continuous and real-time adjustment (Wu et al., 2023; Wu and Ham, 2025).

Although improvisation may appear to be a practice grounded in freedom and autonomy, it is not devoid of structure. It unfolds within what Kamoche & Cunha (2001) describe as minimal structures: flexible and shared frameworks that provide coherence and orientation for action within social and technical boundaries. Much like the underlying patterns that enable jazz musicians to perform collectively, these structures guide spontaneity without dictating it (Vera & Crossan, 2004).

According to Kamoche & Cunha (2001), minimal structures can be categorized as social or technical. Social structures refer to shared behavioral norms and communication codes that shape collective performance, supporting either collaborative or autonomous modes, such as when actors or musicians alternate between ensemble and solo performances. Technical structures, on the other hand, concern the tangible elements of production such as scripts, guidelines, or musical compositions. These are defined as minimal precisely because they must leave room for performers to express spontaneity. In the case of influencer marketing, technical structures include the pool of infrastructures that shape content creation, such as platform affordances, brand managers’ directives, or community requests. Social structures, instead, develop and are shared over time within groups accustomed to performing collectively. In this context, they correspond to the modes of interaction adopted within the community, evolving through mediated engagement. Together, these structures reflect the key

dimensions that creators enact in their online activities: content creation and community interaction (Kamoche & Cunha, 2001; Kozinets et al., 2023).

In the livestreaming context, technical minimal structures may include scripts, streaming templates, or platform mechanics that shape the flow of content, while social minimal structures relate to shared behavioral norms and communication cues that sustain either collective coordination or solo improvisation.

Although minimal structures exist objectively, their application is subjectively interpreted and influenced by personal style, prior experience, and tolerance for uncertainty (Mannucci et al., 2021). However, this aspect appears to be largely neglected in existing business research, which typically approaches improvisation as a collective phenomenon. In fact, most improvisation studies originate from organizational research, where metaphors such as jazz ensembles or theatrical performances are used to illustrate how collectives operate under unpredictable conditions (Hatch, 1999; Weick, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2004). This collectivist approach has also been adopted in marketing literature, where improvisation is recognized as a crucial practice for engaging audiences increasingly resistant to conventional advertising messages (Borah et al., 2020). Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) used the metaphor of improvisational theater to describe how brands co-create performances with consumers within social media environments. Similarly, Gensler et al. (2013) emphasize that while brands may establish general rules as boundary conditions for improvisational performance and brand storytelling, they cannot predict the final narrative direction. Audiences thus play an active role in co-creating brand narratives, often leading to unpredictable outcomes, especially within brand communities, where users share experiential insights and provide real-time feedback (Roy Bhattacharjee et al., 2022).

Since both creators and influencers play a third-party role (Delbaere et al., 2021), acting as digital intermediaries between brands and consumers (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020), examining the improvisational performance of streamers becomes essential to interpret their behaviors, those of their communities, and the impact that their improvisation exerts on brands. It also offers insights into how

advertising strategies function and are activated within synchronous contexts, while allowing a deeper exploration of improvisational dynamics from an individual rather than a collective perspective.

Moreover, unlike previous studies where improvisation was primarily examined as a performance practice, livestreaming introduces a dual imperative: streamers must simultaneously pursue creative expression and commercial goals. This duality complicates the balance between spontaneity and strategic intent, as creators must maintain engagement while aligning with brand expectations. Preserving this equilibrium is essential for delivering persuasive brand messages without compromising the quality or authenticity of the live performance (Duffy, 2017; Abidin, 2017).

Taken together, these insights highlight the need to study livestreaming as a distinct activity in influencer marketing in which content creativity, relational maintenance, and commercial integration unfold simultaneously, requiring own strategies. To explore how streamers sustain such performances and negotiate the timing of brand integration, this study employs a qualitative design combining in-depth interviews and netnographic observation, with the aim of capturing their lived experiences and examining how they enact improvisation and advertising integration.

3.3 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in hermeneutics (Thompson, 1997) to explore how streamers deliver advertising during improvised, real-time performances where meaning is seen as emerging from patterned narratives in situated cultural contexts (Thompson et al., 1994). Following Belk's (2017) recommendation, the study was designed with in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the primary method, complemented by netnography in a strictly supportive role. Consistent with this interpretive stance, the aim was not to generate a grounded theory but to develop a typological framework (Doty & Glick, 1994) that captures the improvisational experiences of streamers in live environments.

3.3.1 Sample selection and data collection

The core dataset consists of 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, supported by contextual netnographic observations. Interviews involved 14 streamers (all Twitch Partners), 7 long-term

viewers, and 4 talent-agency representatives, recruited through snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019). Viewers were selected based on consistent engagement with a specific streamer, while agencies helped assess construct validity. The final sample consisted of 25 Italian participants who provided rich insights, allowing us to reach thematic saturation as no new patterns emerged (Saunders et al., 2018). Data were collected and analyzed from May 2023 to March 2025, with interviews ranging from 30 to 160 minutes. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample, with informants identified using the letters S for streamers, V for viewers, and A for agencies.

Respondent	Gender	Age	Length (min)	Twitch subscription (in yrs)	Average viewers (all time)*
S1	F	30	57	10	337
S2	M	32	63+96	13	548
S3	F	27	46	5	241
S4	M	23	58	7	53
S5	M	30	32	13	1218
S6	M	30	52	5	191
S7	M	33	53	5	42
S8	M	26	32	8	42
S9	F	30	30	5	500
S10	M	27	45	4	745
S11	F	36	66	12	149
S12	F	30	42	6	94
S13	M	32	77	3	353
S14	M	24	56	10	373

Respondent	Gender	Age	Length (min)	Twitch subscription (in yrs)
V1	M	33	138	12
V2	M	32	103	5
V3	M	33	86	13
V4	F	51	40	3
V5	M	36	33	6
V6	M	35	53	13
V7	M	50	60	7

Respondent	Gender	Age	Length (min)	Yrs of experience in LS
A1	M	33	53	6
A2	M	33	55	6
A3	M	28	40	4
A4	M	28	49	7

Table 1 Interviews' informant profiles.

**As of July 2025 from Twitchtracker.com*

Netnographic observations followed Kozinets' (2015) approach and focused on how advertising is integrated into live performance. More than 80 hours of content were observed across Twitch, Discord, and related platforms. Particular attention was paid to advertorial content (Jhang-Li & Liou, 2024), examining format, timing, and style across archetypes. Observations provided cultural context and helped validate interview data (see Table 2).

Site	Elements	Usage	Length (hrs)
Twitch	Advertising	Insight verification	66
	Chat interactions	Insight verification + Triangulation	
	Rituals	Triangulation + Cultural Enrichment	
Discord	Chat interactions	Triangulation + Cultural Enrichment	5
	Rituals	Triangulation + Cultural Enrichment	
Platforms	Longitudinal metrics	Insight verification + Triangulation	10

Table 2 Summary of observation

3.3.2 Procedure

Following Belk's (2017) recommendation, the study was designed with in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the primary method, complemented by netnography. The integration of these two methods ensured both depth of interpretive insight and cultural contextualization. Our interpretive process followed the principles of the hermeneutic circle (Thompson et al., 1994; Thompson, 1997), seeking to uncover the structures of meaning participants attributed to their lived experience. We

began with holistic readings of each interview and observational account to capture the overall narrative structure (intratextual interpretation).

In this initial stage, we aimed to explore how streamer performances differ from those of other creators. Through inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) we identified recurring themes that highlighted this distinction. These topics were then compared across individual accounts (intertextual interpretation). The process was iterative and reflexive: insights emerging in later stages prompted us to revisit earlier transcripts, refine categories, and deepen our interpretation. Throughout, the analysis involved a continuous negotiation between participants' narratives and was informed by previous literature.

Netnographic observations, conducted in parallel, were used not only to contextualize interview findings but also to systematically observe how advertising and branded content were integrated into live performances across different streamer archetypes. This allowed us to capture the formats, timings, and interactional strategies used for advertising, providing an additional layer of verification for insights derived from interviews and ensuring their ecological validity. To ensure analytical transparency and rigor, we incorporated elements of the Gioia Method (Gioia et al., 2013), particularly during data coding and development of the archetypes. This structured approach enabled us to move systematically from first-order participant expressions to second-order theoretical concepts, and ultimately to aggregate dimensions that provided the foundation for our typology. Unlike the Gioia Methods' traditional emphasis on theory building, however, our focus was on typological theorizing (Doty & Glick, 1994). Specifically, we aimed to identify distinct configurations of improvisational practice and expression that characterize streamers' performance in synchronous settings.

3.3.3 Data analysis and interpretation

We combined hermeneutic interpretation with the coding logic of the Gioia Method (Gioia et al., 2013). Transcripts were first coded inductively to extract first-order concepts, then grouped into second-order themes and aggregate dimensions (see Figure 4).

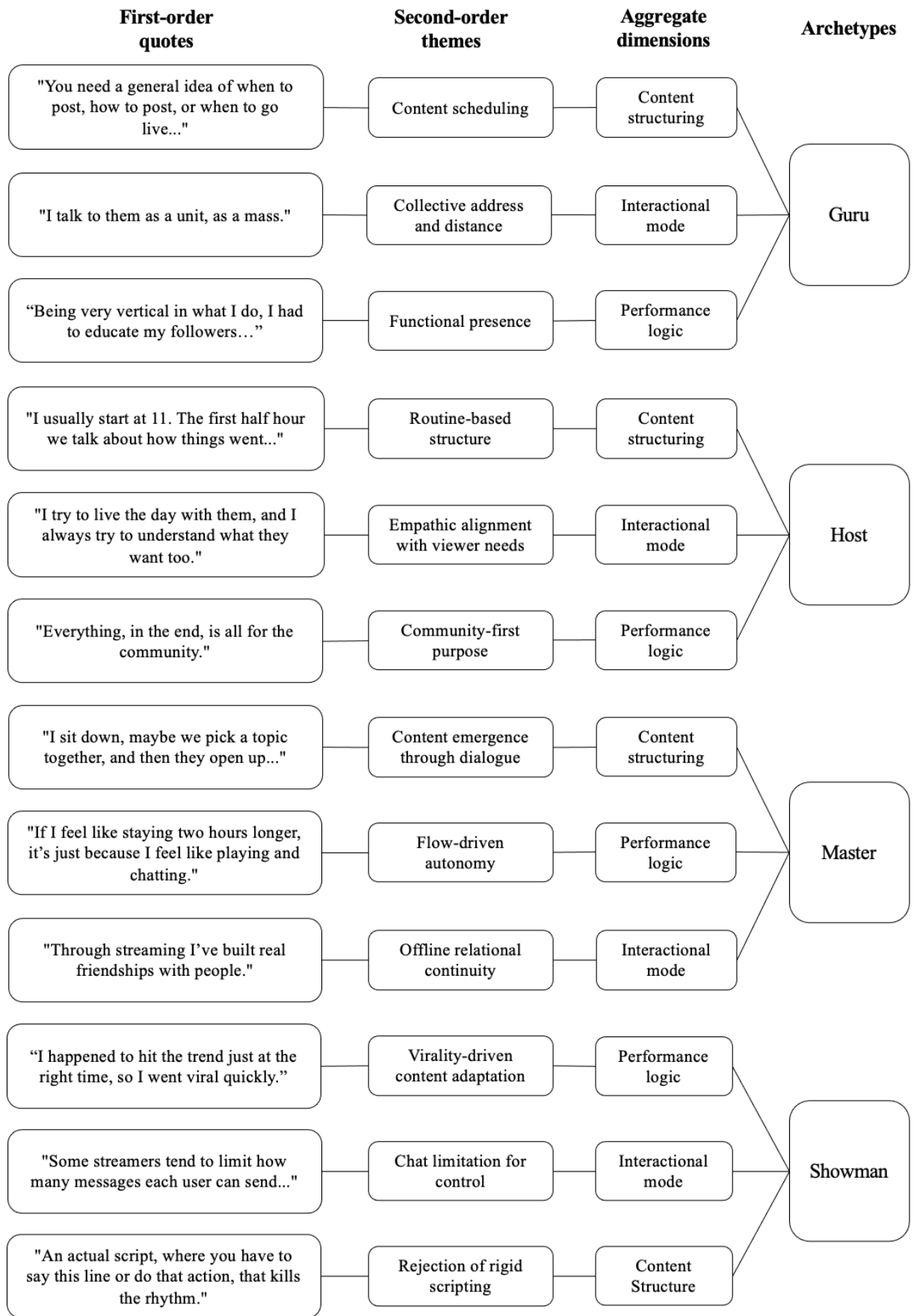


Figure 4 Data coding procedure

While Gioia's coding is often used for theory building, here it supported the construction of ideal types via typological theorizing (Doty & Glick, 1994). Each archetype reflects a distinct improvisational logic within livestreaming. This approach draws on typological precedents in organizational and consumer research (e.g., Miles & Snow, 1978; Perren & Kozinets, 2018). Consistent with the hermeneutic circle, the analysis evolved recursively; new insights led to a re-reading of data and refinement of interpretations. Rigor was ensured through reflexive memoing (Belk, 2017), triangulation of informant types, and a member-check phase with selected participants. Observational data enriched the analysis, offering ecological depth and reinforcing the relational and temporal dimensions of livestreaming. The resulting typology captures how streamers integrate real-time interaction and branded content into performative routines.

3.4 Findings

The netnographic analysis revealed that streamers improvise under pressure—a multifaceted pressure arising from platforms, viewers, brands, and synchrony itself. We therefore present the findings related to this aspect and, together with the insights derived from the literature reviewed above, develop a 2×2 matrix identifying four archetypes of streamers. Through an in-depth analysis of interviews and observational data, these archetypes capture the diverse orientations that streamers adopt in their improvisational performances, according to their individual approach to social (i.e., interaction and community relationships) and technical (i.e., platform rules or content format) livestreaming minimal structures (Mannucci et al., 2021; Kamoche & Cunha, 2001). Defining these types of improvisation helps delineate the potential opportunities and risks inherent in advertising initiatives and collaborations with this specific category of digital creators.

3.4.1 Improvisation Under Pressure

Livestreaming requires creativity and technical skill, but above all, consistency, emotional availability, and continuous presence. As one agency explained: “*On Twitch, you are present for your audience only when you are broadcasting*” (A1). This dependency on live exposure forces streamers to maintain intense physical routines: “*On Twitch, consistency is what drives you. So, you have to*

stream every day [...] If you want to make it a profession, you have to stream at least four hours a day. Minimum” (A4), where interruptions carry real risks: “If you take a week off, it’s OK. But if you take 15 days, you risk losing half your audience” (V7).

Indeed, platforms themselves fuel this dynamic by fostering competition when streamers are not live (Figure 5) and creators are acutely aware of it: *“I rarely miss a stream. I must be really sick, like stuck in bed” (S1).*

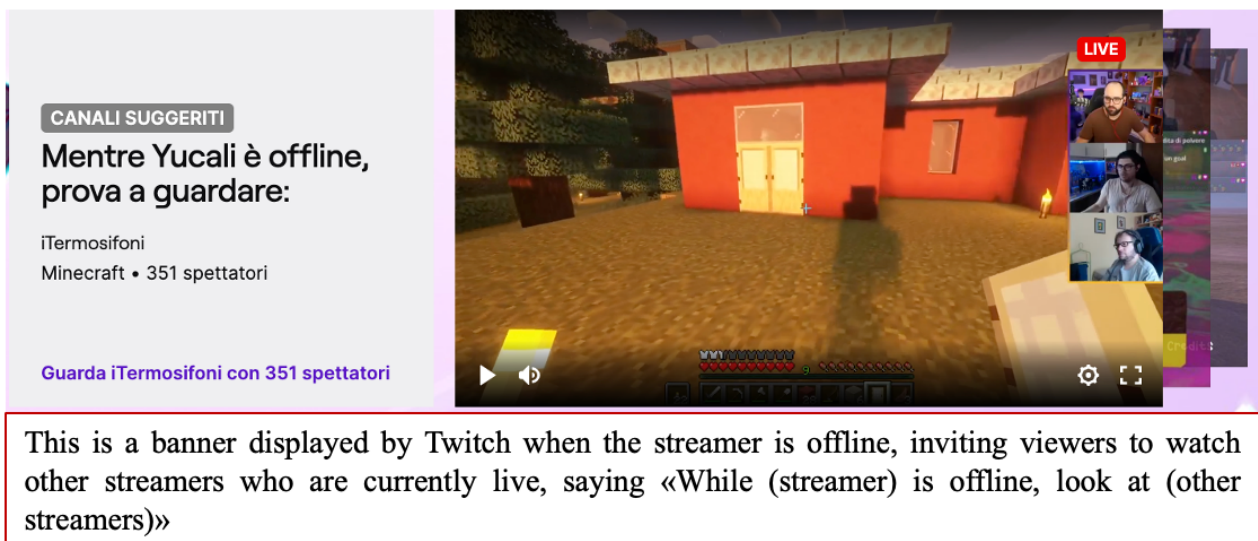


Figure 5 *An example of a Twitch banner fostering competition among streamers.*

The pressure is not only physical but psychological, possibly leading to missteps or strain. As one streamer noted: “On YouTube, you can turn the camera off and go back to normal. A streamer can’t do that [...] even when you’re not streaming, you’re replying to comments, talking to moderators, or dealing with subscribers” (S2). Another added: “This is a job that never lets you unplug [...] You never really disconnect” (S11); “My brain is constantly working [...] I rarely relax” (S1). Even viewers recognize this toll: “It’s a constant flow [...] mentally exhausting [...] sometimes they crash, lose followers, or disappear entirely” (V1). Resulting in impacting brand partnerships. “I’m a company and I can’t risk giving my brand [...] to a streamer who might disappear overnight or say something offensive” (A3).

Hence, streamers must perform emotional openness and stability under constant scrutiny. As one agency noted: *“In streaming, you can’t just do a sales pitch, because the viewer sees you live for*

many hours and knows you” (A1). But this intimacy comes at a cost. “Every time you have to fake something [...] it just drains you” (S2). “Psychologically, it often puts you in extreme conditions. I’ve seen so many burn out because of this” (A4).

Then, improvisation becomes an essential coping strategy that allows creators to adapt, fill time, and stay present under pressure. *“The best definition is the ability to improvise—because that’s what defines them most” (A1). “It’s pure improvisation, ours” (S2).*

Streamers develop individual strategies to balance rhythm and spontaneity yet sustain their presence while protecting their well-being: *“Each one has their own method [...] Structure is still key” (A4).*

These physical, emotional and psychological pressures frame the improvisational styles examined in the following typology.

3.4.2 Four archetypes of streamers’ performance style

To build a typology of livestreaming performance, investigating how they improvise under pressure, we drew on Kozinets et al. (2023) and Kamoche & Cunha (2001). We focused on how they approach content creation and community engagement as technical and social structures of improvisation, respectively.

Approaches to content creation ranged from full spontaneity to defined formats. As one streamer explained: *“Some streamers just turn on the camera and start talking, that’s their intention. If you’re a good talker, that works. Others create an actual show” (S2).* This variability was assessed by examining stream titles and live activities. Creators with fixed formats (e.g., one game or recurring topic) displayed a scheduled approach, while others adjusted content fluidly in real-time, indicating an improvisational attitude.

Conversely, community engagement was evaluated through the management of real-time interaction, considering whether streamers remain open to participatory dialogue or instead guide the discourse in a stream-of-consciousness manner, adopting a more monologic style. As one agency noted: *“Some are inclined to collaborate, while others prefer working solo and must promote themselves differently” (A1).* Another added, *“Depending on the number of viewers and chat activity, streamers*

manage it differently. Some read every single message and respond to each user. Others limit how many messages a user can send in a certain time frame” (A4).

In sum, while prolonged live presence is a shared requirement, streamers’ performance differ in how they balance improvisation in content structure and audience interaction: dynamics with direct implications for advertising effectiveness and influencer-brand fit.

The Guru: Planned Improvisation

Guru streamers adopt highly structured formats centered on a single domain, such as professional gaming, coaching, or content creation. Their streams follow segmented schedules, with limited interaction confined to controlled breaks. As one agency observed: *“Some dedicate very little space to interaction—for example, professional gamers who are 100% focused on the game” (A2).*

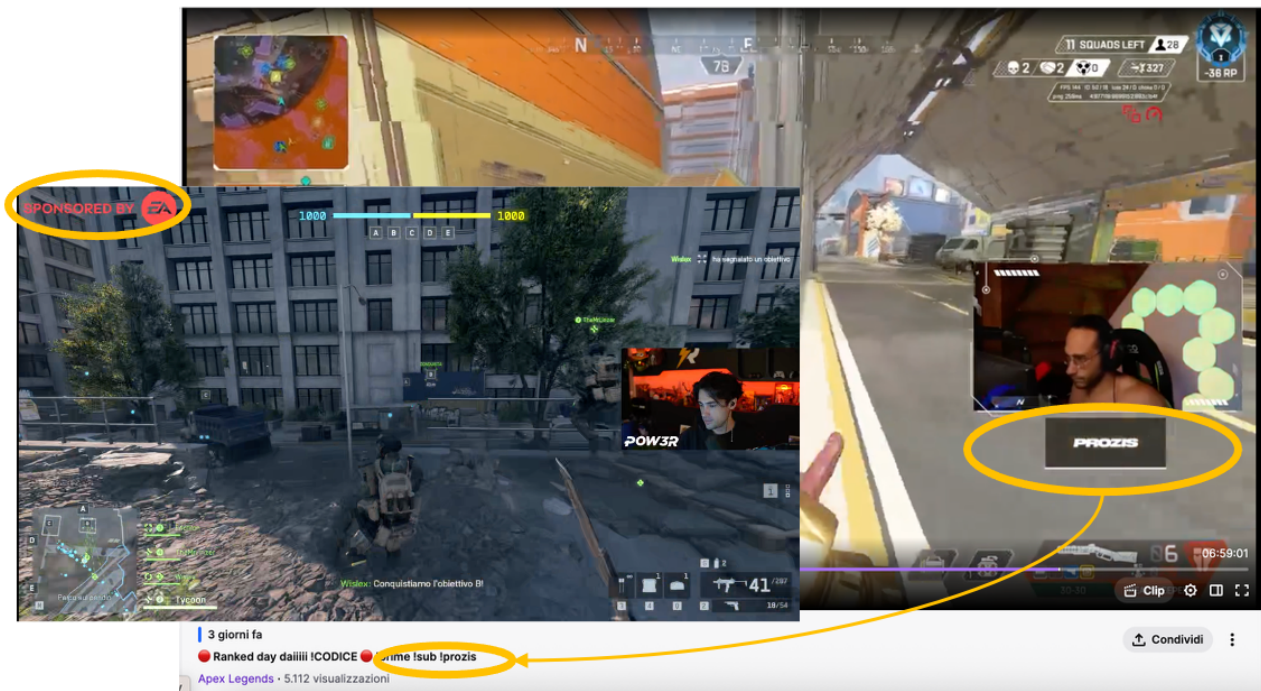
For many Gurus, streaming is secondary to their main profession, serving primarily to maintain visibility: *“Twitch is just an add-on for me. I use it to have direct contact with the people who follow me” (S3).* *“I might start explaining the behind-the-scenes [...], just to answer a couple of questions related to the video I’ve posted on YouTube” (S4).* *“When I’ve got an important tournament coming up, I avoid streaming because it would take away too much of my focus” (S8).*

Their communication style is deliberately impersonal and collective: *“If I talk about how I’m doing personally, I say it to the chat group, not to a specific person. I’d never start a discussion with an individual viewer. I speak to them as a unit, as a mass” (S14).*

This emotional distance is reinforced through external tools like Telegram or Discord, where interactions remain functional: *“There’s a private Telegram group, where we talk maybe a bit more about the game...” (V2).* To maintain this detachment, Gurus rely on moderators who manage chat dynamics in real-time: *“When the chat gets stuck, [the moderator] already knows the phrases to use to raise the mood a bit” (S12).* However, this tightly curated environment can sometimes appear exclusionary: *“Being very vertical in what I do, I had to educate my followers [...] initially with a heavy hand, to bring order. Now I try to be more forgiving” (S14).* Viewers recognize and value their

authority: “If they take control of that situation in a moment of discomfort, we’ll come across as someone who has the situation in hand” (V1)

Improvisation is ritual-based on scheduled blocks, controlled Q&A, and clear separation between content and interaction, emphasizing expertise-driven credibility. This structured expertise-driven style makes Guru streamers ideal for advertising formats that are seamlessly integrated into the visual frame or session titles (Figure 6). Branded content generally regard new videogames releases, tutorials and dedicated streams, or product placement such as food supplement as energy drink to emphasize support in streamers’ performance.



These Guru streamers are focused on gaming, and collaborate with brands relate to performance and gameplay (e.g. Prozis, EA Sport). The sponsorship is made visible through on-screen banners and the session title.

Figure 6 Guru streamers’ advertising integration

The Host: Responsive Improvisation

Unlike Gurus, Host streamers create welcoming environments where viewers feel part of a shared routine. Even though their sessions are guided by repeatable formats, with daily schedules and recurring segments that provide rhythm and predictability, ranging from Just Chatting to co-working or ASMR, the discourse is relaxed and socially driven. As a result, they remain open to real-time

audience cues, improvising within fixed time blocks: *“I usually start at 11. In the first half hour, we talk about how things went, what they did yesterday, and what they’ll do today. Then I make a to-do list and start organizing... kind of setting the day together”* (S9).

Hence, they focus on relational continuity, offering emotional stability while maintaining controlled spontaneity: *“The study or preparation part is just about the content, but the just chatting part [...] comes naturally”* (S11). The performance becomes a dialogue, responsive to community mood: *“I try to live the day with them, and I always try to understand what they want too”* (S6).

Co-creation is common, as explained by an agency: *“There are even games that are guided and influenced by the chat itself [...] allowing viewers to interact with the streamer by essentially playing themselves”* (A2). These spaces promote emotional safety: *“I want people to understand that [...] there is a safe zone, a place where you can just be”* (S11). *“As if we were always sitting at a table in a pub”* (S10). Viewers echo this: *“She really is the ultimate chill environment [...] people feel very welcomed”* (V3).

Host employ a relational approach to advertising, involve product or services that can be embedded within their discourse and schedules through direct product reviews, collaborative design feedback, or dedicated live segments. Here, brands are not simply displayed but shared with the community and integrated into their interaction, often through light mentions or branded Twitch Bits, that deeply resonate with the community. These fit naturally into the stream’s flow, becoming part of the shared experience rather than interrupting it (Figure 7).

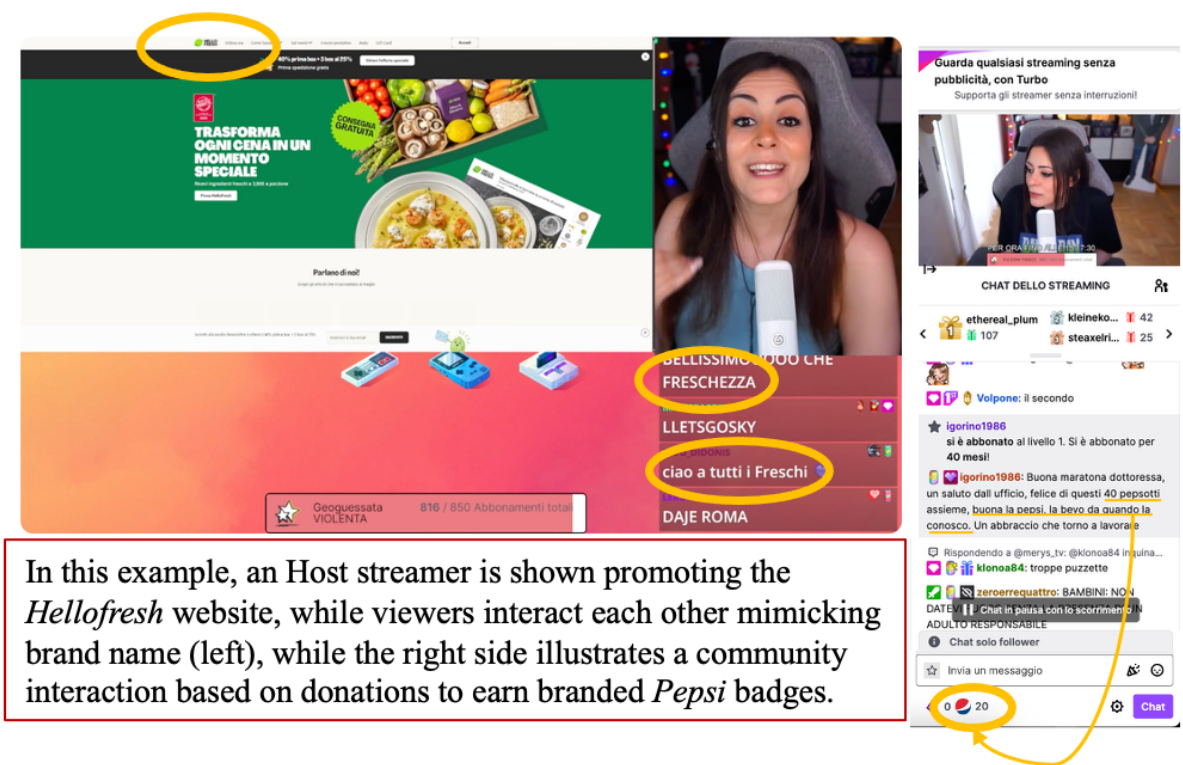


Figure 7 Host streamers' advertising integration

The Master Performance: Fluid Improvisation

Masters cultivate immersive, emotionally resonant streams where content and connection unfold together. Sessions evolve without a set agenda, often guided by mutual storytelling and personal disclosure, driven by emotional resonance, audience dialogue, and shared momentum : “*I sit down, maybe we pick a topic together, and then they open up [...]*” (S1).

Viewers are active participants, while the streamer serves as an emotional anchor: “I want to build a group, a community where people care about what I do but also have others they can interact with” (S2). These bonds extend offline: “Through streaming I’ve built real friendships with people. We see each other often” (S1). One streamer described the ethos: “I think it’s about the ability to give love. If you care [...] it comes back” (S5). Viewers experience an intimacy akin to kinship: “You live her life; you basically live her problems [...] as if she were a close relative” (V4).

Improvisation is emotional and instinctive, situated and emergent, adapting to mood and energy: “If I feel like staying two hours longer [...] I do. But if I’m tired and don’t like what I’m offering, I’d rather end the stream” (S1). The improvisation structure is the relationship itself.

This trust-based relationship extends to advertising: “For me, sponsorships [...] are just one extra thing” (V5). As an agency confirms: “There’s so much trust that it often converts very well into purchases” (A2). Yet Masters are selective and cautious: “I could accept every single commercial proposal I get, but I’ve never done that [...]” (S1). As another adds: “If your community no longer recognizes you [...] they won’t support you anymore” (S5).

Advertising becomes part of the community’s storytelling: co-present, participatory, and deeply embedded in the emotional rhythm of the stream (Figure 8). As such, Masters are suitable to promote activities or experiences directly related to shareable format with the community, fostering a sense of pshysical and emotional participation and co-created narratives.



Figure 8 Master streamers’ advertising integration

The Showman: Theatrical Improvisation

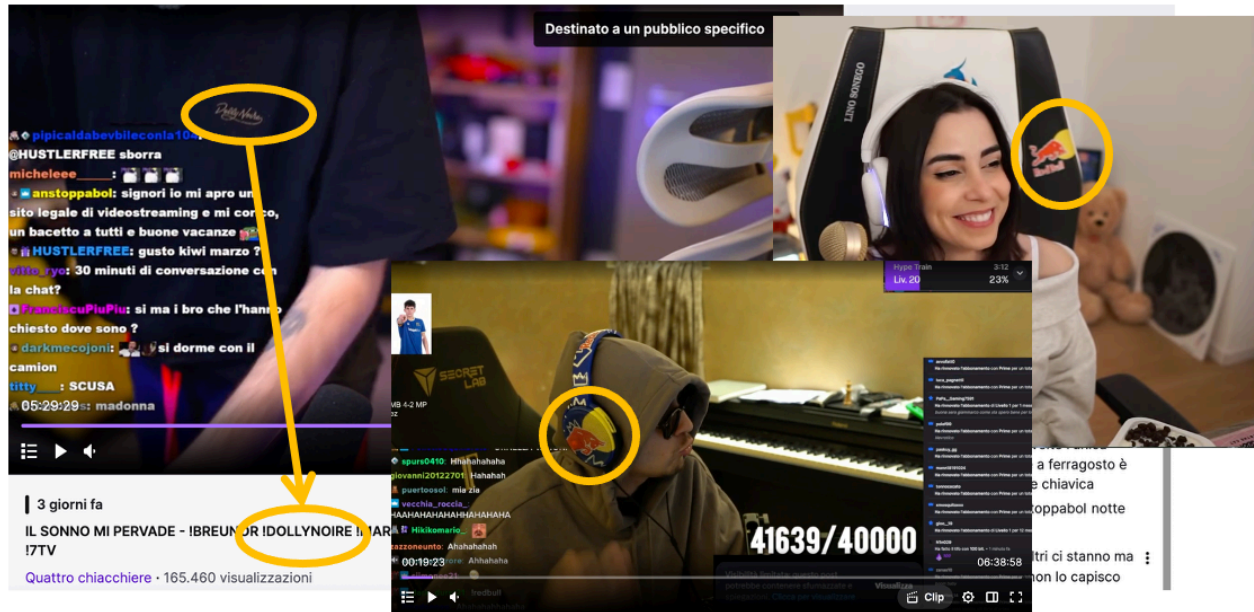
Showmen deliver high-energy, entertainment-driven performances that resemble live digital variety shows. Their sessions are fast-paced, trend-driven, and theatrically timed, often blending gaming,

commentary, interviews, and unexpected segments: *“The beauty is that you’re listening to someone who can talk about anything [...] You can be playing Call of Duty and ten minutes later be talking about cooking”* (S7).

Livestreaming here is rhythmic and technical, sustaining flow without fixed scripts: *“An actual script, where you have to say this line or do that action, kills the rhythm. Full stop”* (S7). Many embraces exaggerated personas and theatrical gestures, creating comedy, live sketches, or esports-style commentary. *“What really works in entertainment is being able to talk non-stop [...] the idea is to make people want to keep watching”* (S13).

Improvisation becomes spectacles, prioritizing content entertainment and momentum over intimacy: *“I happened to hit the trend just at the right time [...] then I changed the format because it wasn’t trendy anymore”* (S13). Yet, interaction is limited to protect the performance tempo. As one agency noted: *“Some streamers tend to limit how many messages each user can send [...] This makes the chat more readable”* (A1). The style is often monologic: *“I have very few interactions with the chat [...] My style is very one-directional”* (S13). Even interactions are designed as performance: *“The skill lies in making people respond with just one word”* (V6).

Advertising aligns with this performative approach, through exposure: viral stunts, visual props (such as branded chairs, headsets), or high-energy campaign activations, are integrated into the visual field without disrupting rhythm, leveraging the streamer’s charisma and format fluency (Figure 9).



Here Showman streamers acting as brand ambassadors by showcasing sponsored brands through strategically placed product placement designed to remain visible throughout the livestream (e.g. Redbull), sometimes even integrated into the stream title (e.g. Dollynoire)

Figure 9 Showman streamers' advertising integration

The resulting archetypes illustrate how improvisation in livestreaming takes multiple forms, shaped by each streamer's balance between content structure and real-time community engagement, maintained at the highest possible levels of frequency and duration (see Figure 10).

Our observations reveal that brand integration represents a key site where streamers manage the temporal structure of their performances. Across the four archetypes (Guru, Host, Master, and Showman) advertising moments expose how creators calibrate rhythm, continuity, and attention. Rather than secondary insertions, these moments function as live practices through which streamers adjust pacing, tone, and energy to maintain flow while responding to commercial prompts. Advertising therefore becomes a visible expression of temporal management, where structure, repetition, affective continuity, and momentum transform commercial communication into coordinated performance. Ultimately, these patterns reveal the underlying logic of endurance improvisation: the ability to navigate multiple temporalities while embrace effort to sustaining presence, engagement, and relationships over time.

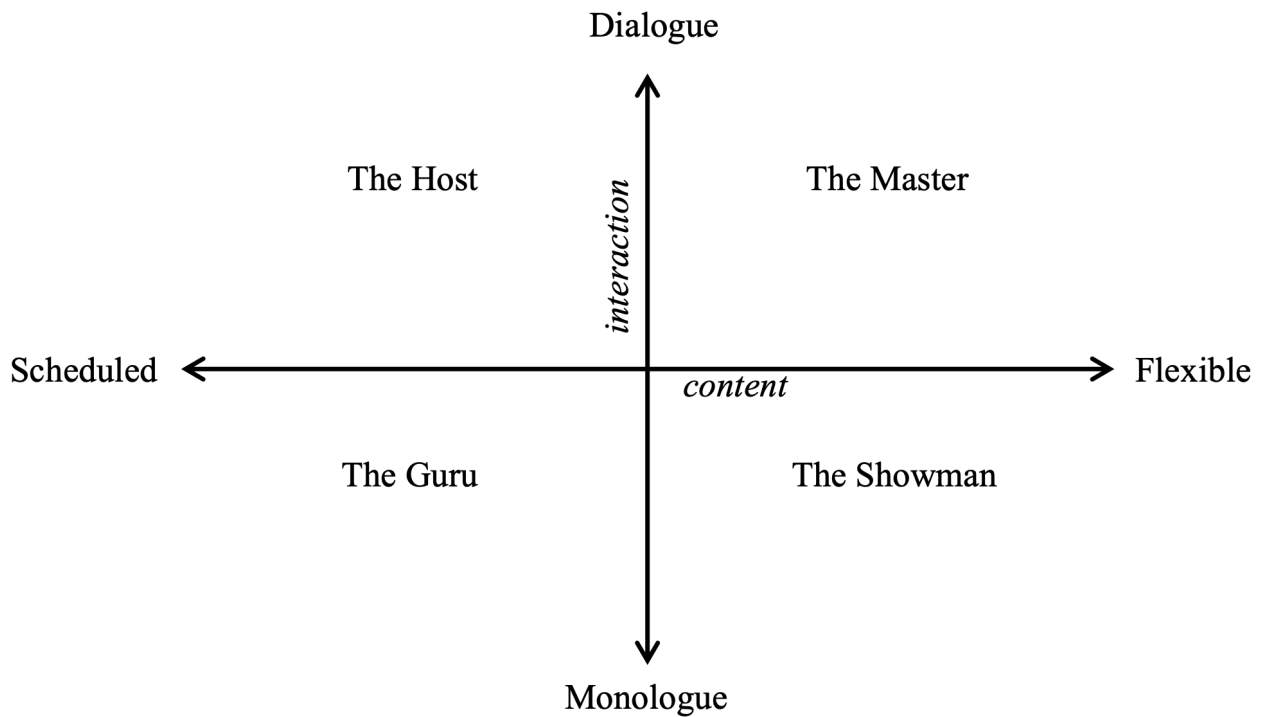


Figure 10 *A typology of streamers' approach to livestreaming minimal structures*

3.5 Discussion

3.5.1 Endurance Improvisation: Streamers as Performers of Real-Time Continuous Presence

Our findings reveal that streamers operate within a highly compressed temporal environment, where activity must be sustained and adapted in real-time.

Unlike other creators' objectives, streamers' primary goal is to sustain a durational presence that enables them to thrive over time while effectively managing improvisation and sponsored content.

We define this performance as *endurance improvisation*: the sustained capacity to remain present, adaptive, and engaging over extended sessions while navigating the ongoing flow of unscripted activity. Whereas improvisation allows streamers to maintain momentum, bridging immediacy and interactivity, endurance enables them to manage uncertainty across physical, psychological, commercial, and temporal pressures (Markell, 2017; Buckley et al., 2025; Wu & Ham, 2025). This activity is not reducible to how long or how often they stream (Wu & Ham, 2025), but it underscores their capacity to adapt without losing coherence, to withstand the unpredictability of their environment (technical interruptions, emotional fluctuations, audience feedback, and brand

demands), and to sustain attention and relational engagement despite fatigue or saturation. Streamers do not merely spend time online; they structure and cultivate it, transforming hours of exposure into a continuous rhythm that keeps communities active and brands visible. Their work exemplifies what Buckley et al. (2025) define as the performative pressure of real-time media, a condition in which presence is both demanded and monetized.

Importantly, endurance is not only physical, mental or social, but becomes temporal: it reflects a strategy to transform time itself into a managed resource through one can withstand hardship and suffering in an unpredictable environment (Salazar & Schreeeder, 2022; Markell, 2017). By continuously recalibrating this temporal balance, streamers illustrate how creative work in synchronous environments depends not only on technical skill or audience sensitivity, but on a cultivated temporal awareness: an understanding of time as the fundamental infrastructure of performance.

3.5.2 (Temporal) Minimal Structures of Endurance Improvisation

For most of the history of digital marketing, advertising activities has been organized according to asynchronous logics. Content creation, distribution, and consumption typically occurred at different points in time, allowing firms and creators to plan, edit, and optimize their messages before audiences engaged with them. This temporal separation offered predictability and managerial control: campaigns could be tested, narratives refined, and results evaluated through measurable cycles (Audrezet et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2024). In such systems, communication followed sequential phases (production, dissemination, engagement, evaluation) each governed by standardized metrics and managerial oversight.

Livestreaming, by contrast, compresses these phases into a single, unfolding process. Creation, interaction, and feedback converge in real-time, demanding that creators sustain improvisation rather than execute pre-defined strategies. Social media feeds, or interactive broadcasts, communication unfolds as it happens, yet synchrony enables multiple actors to coexist within the same temporal frame, fostering immediacy, reciprocity, and co-presence (Hrastinski, 2008). This shift is not merely

technological but experiential: it reorganizes the very structure of participation, replacing planned engagement with continuous presence.

The move from asynchronous to synchronous interaction establishes a new temporal structure that underpins the practice of livestreaming. Within this architecture, different modes of time, structured (Chronos), situational (Kairos), and durational (Aion), intersect and frame the temporal strategies sustaining endurance improvisation.

3.5.3 Navigating temporalities: Aion, Chronos, and Kairos in livestreaming

To clarify how endurance improvisation is enacted, we draw on the classical temporal triad of Aion, Chronos, and Kairos to illustrate how streamers configure and inhabit time during livestreaming. This framework reveals how different temporalities are combined to sustain performance and relational continuity under conditions of uncertainty. It also allows us to identify recurring temporal patterns that shape how creators and advertisers navigate this indefinite and fast-paced environment.

Derived from ancient Greek thought, Aion refers to lifespan time as a sense of duration unbounded by measurable limits, characterized by a continuous state of being “on” (Philipson, 1949). Chronos denotes measurable, sequential time, expressed through scheduling, segmentation, and repetition (Salazar & Scheerder, 2022; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015), while Kairos captures situational time, hence the opportune moment for responsiveness, experience, and connection (Ciborra, 1999; Vera & Crossan, 2004). In livestreaming, these temporalities converge to form the temporal structure through which streamers perform endurance improvisation. Chronos provides structure and rhythm, enabling consistency and predictability; Kairos fuels responsiveness, spontaneity, and affective resonance; and Aion embodies the horizon of endurance: the ability to sustain presence, visibility, and value over time. Together, they define how streamers manage temporal flow: Chronos anchors, Kairos animates, and Aion endures (see Figure 11).

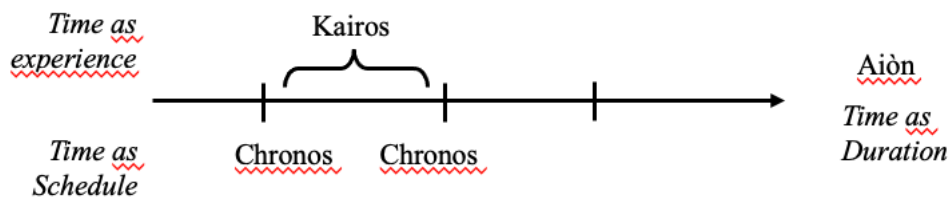


Figure 11 *Minimal Structures of Endurance Improvisation*

In practical terms, the configuration of Chronos and Kairos determines how each streamer enacts improvisation and approaches the pursuit of Aion, adopting endurance to achieve continuity of visibility, value, and relationship.

Endurance improvisation varies according to how streamers structure time: through scheduled routines and measurable blocks (Chronos), affect-driven responsiveness (Kairos), or a dynamic balance between the two. These configurations reveal distinct temporal orientations toward improvisation, reflecting different levels of tolerance for uncertainty (Mannucci et al., 2021) and distinctive strategies of temporal management that sustain performance and well-being (Kamoche & Cunha, 2001). Table 3 displays these temporal structures.

Temporal Dimension	Definition	Function in Livestreaming	Empirical evidence
Chronos	Structural time	Provides rhythm, discipline, and predictability to structure presence	Schedule content and ritual engagement
Kairos	Action time	Enables spontaneity, responsiveness, and affective alignment with the audience	Experiential moments and viral content
Aion	Durational time	Sustain structures and actions consistently over time	Endurance improvisation

Table 3 *Temporal structure of endurance improvisation*

Through this lens, *endurance improvisation* can be understood as the temporal competence that allows streamers to inhabit synchrony without losing coherence. Endurance, or Aion, does not merely imply persistence or resistance to fatigue; it represents the ability to sustain improvisation over time, continuously rebalancing the tensions between Chronos and Kairos.

3.5.4 Advertising and Streamers' Endurance Improvisation Style

While endurance improvisation defines how streamers sustain performance under temporal pressure, it also shapes how commercial activity is integrated within these ongoing flows. Advertising must coexist with the same temporal dynamics that govern performance and interaction, requiring streamers to adapt brand communication to the rhythms of Chronos and the moments of Kairos that structure their live presence.

Empirically, these configurations give rise to two dominant logics of advertising integration that translate temporal management into commercial practice. A relational logic weaves brand messages into emotional exchanges, habitual routines, and participatory rituals, as seen in the *Host* and *Master* performance styles. Advertising becomes embedded within the live social experience, synchronized with audience affect and shared momentum.

A staged logic, in contrast, incorporates advertising through scripted mentions, visible props, or theatrical delivery, typical of the *Guru* and *Showman*. Here, the commercial element is temporally segmented and foregrounded within controlled intervals of performance.

Both logics illustrate how streamers extend their endurance improvisation into commercial activity: by aligning advertising with the temporal dimension, they can best sustain. In doing so, they pursue Aion, their goal of continuous visibility and engagement, through distinct mechanisms of synchronization. Relational integration transforms advertising into a continuous, affective rhythm, while staged integration maintains distinct temporal boundaries that protect narrative coherence. Through these minimal structures, streamers balance unpredictability and coordination, demonstrating how temporal management underpins their ability to endure, engage, and remain valuable in real time (Mannucci et al., 2021).

Building on this framework, we identify four performance styles through which streamers enact endurance improvisation. Each reflects a distinct temporal strategy combining different configurations of Chronos and Kairos that function as minimal structures of improvisation (Kamoche

& Cunha, 2001; see Figure 11). Through these strategies, streamers pursue Aion by adopting either a staged or a relational logic of advertising integration.

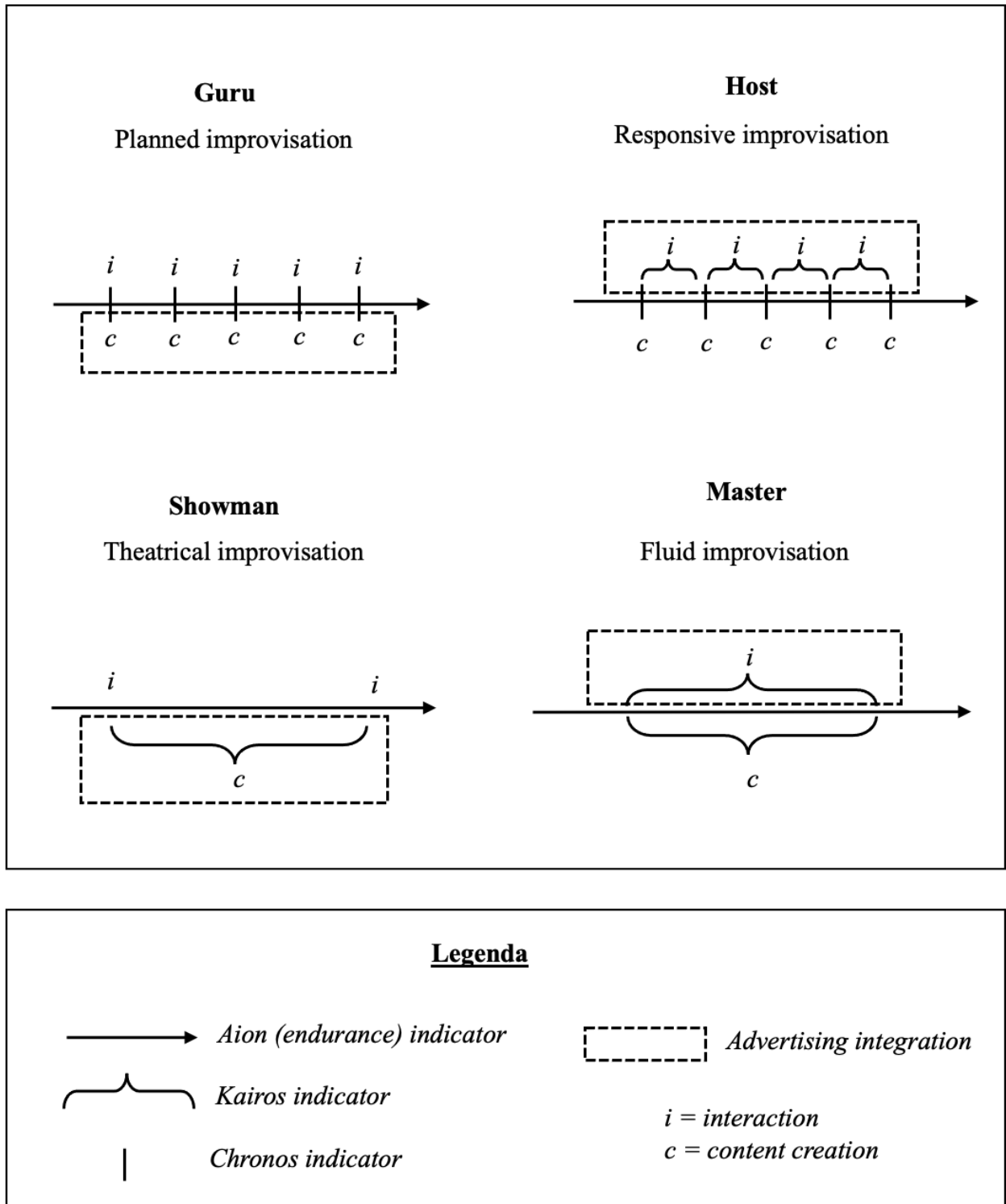


Figure 12 Temporal strategies in the Four Endurance Improvisational Styles

Archetypes	Minimal structures	Endurance improvisation Style (temporal strategies)	Advertising Logic	Key Mechanisms	Illustrative Features
Guru	Predominantly Chronos (structural control)	Planned improvisation oriented toward authority and expertise.	Staged Advertising integrated through scripted mentions, visual props, or pre-defined slots.	Segmented sessions; scheduled blocks; controlled Q&A windows	Staged testing: Product placement, tutorial, dedicated livestreams
Showman	Chronos-dominant with performative moments	Theatrical improvisation oriented toward spectacle and entertainment.		Momentum framing; fast pacing; trend-driven cues; prop-based exposure	Staged exposure: Awareness campaign, viral content, brand exposure
Host	Kairos-dominant with defined schedule	Responsive improvisation oriented toward social cohesion.	Relational Advertising woven into emotional exchanges and participatory rituals.	Daily anchoring routines; participatory pacing guided by chat; conversational mentions	Relational sharing: Direct reviews, product design feedback, dedicated live
Master	Predominantly Kairos (experiential focus)	Fluid improvisation oriented toward shared affect and authenticity.		Emergent pacing shaped by dialogue; narrative weaving; flexible session length	Relational experience: Experience-based storytelling and high-trust campaign, awareness

Table 4 *Typology of streamers' performance styles*

Across these archetypes, endurance improvisation takes distinct temporal forms. Each strategy reflects a particular balance between structure and spontaneity, continuity and immediacy, relational depth and performative display. By aligning these patterns with specific advertising integrations, this framework demonstrates how temporal management shapes brand–streamer fit within synchronous media environments.

The following section elaborates on the theoretical contributions of this framework, linking endurance improvisation and temporal strategies to broader debates on influencer marketing, improvisation, and advertising theory.

3.6 Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the literature on influencer marketing and digital advertising in three keyways, each of which highlights how livestreaming introduces the practices and pressures of digital creators while introducing new conceptual tools for understanding synchronous performance.

First, the findings advance the theorization of streamers as hybrid performers between content creators and influencers who simultaneously engage in professionalized content production and consumption. While previous literature has often framed them as influencers or content creators (e.g. Lee et al., 2023; Kunigita et al., 2023), streamers do not neatly align with either model. Instead, their work is shaped by the need to blend emotional intimacy with strategic performance, all under synchronous conditions. This hybrid role is not a marginal or transitional state, but a defining structure of their performance (Kowert & Daniel, 2021; Yang et al., 2023; Wu & Ham, 2025). Streamers' ability to navigate multiple temporal layers can be linked to what Jordheim (2014) describes as the work of synchronization, the ongoing effort through which actors actively respond to the synchrony imposed by the medium. Yet this work of synchronization involves not only temporal dimensions, but also managerial and business considerations. These additional layers become particularly salient as the outcomes of such coordination can differently affect the integration and effectiveness of advertising. In this sense, the study extends existing models of influencer marketing by foregrounding the

synchronous nature of livestreaming and the complexity it introduces in managing brand collaborations.

Second, we extended improvisation literature by theorizing time as a triadic minimal structure (Aion, Chronos and Kairos) that both enable and constrains live performances. The paper introduces the concept of endurance improvisation as the sustained performance of streamers: the capacity to maintain presence and engagement over extended sessions, integrating brand messages within the ongoing flow of unscripted activity. While prior research has framed improvisation as momentary responsiveness (Ciborra, 1999; Vera & Crossan, 2004), livestreaming requires it to be maintained and adjusted over extended periods. Endurance improvisation therefore captures the performative character of this dynamic, where real-time adjustment and continuous presence are inseparable. Hence, it foregrounds time as a critical dimension. While prior accounts have emphasized the social and technical structures that enable improvisation (Kamoche & Cunha, 2001), our findings show that livestreaming requires continuous adjustment within specific temporal configurations and hence, structure. Moreover, it extends existing accounts of improvisation in organizational and marketing contexts (e.g. Vera & Crossa, 2004; Borah et al., 2020) by situating it within the temporal structures of platform-based environments (Sharma, 2014; Duffy, 2015).

Third, we conceptualize temporal strategies not merely as scheduling efficiency, but the specific ways in which endurance improvisation is enacted by streamers, describing how different approaches shape the integration between content, interaction, and advertising. Temporal strategies reflect how streamers manage time through different configurations of durational (Aion), measurable (Chronos), and situational (Kairos) dimension, in the attempt to preserve their performance and well-being. This framework positions time as a crucial resource for both streamers and brands, prompting the evaluation of synchronous advertising as a powerful tool to be harnessed.

Moreover, from an interpretive standpoint, this shift redefines advertising as a participated: rather than transmitting a fixed narrative, brands participate in the everyday temporality of communities, entering their shared routines, moods, and rituals. The commercial message acquires meaning

through timing, responsiveness, and recognition: it resonates when it aligns with the emotional and temporal rhythms of the live encounter (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). Streamers operate under multiple temporal pressures: algorithmic incentives to remain live, community demands for authenticity, and brand requirements for coherence.

By integrating these contributions, the paper bridges gaps between influencer marketing, performance studies, and advertising strategy offering a typological tool for assessing brand partnerships in synchronous digital environments.

3.7 Managerial implications

3.7.1 Implications for Advertisers

Traditional influencer marketing has long prioritized audience size and engagement metrics as proxies for effectiveness (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). While such indicators may be adequate in asynchronous contexts, they are insufficient in the livestreaming environment. Here, streamers do not merely endorse products: they perform them in real-time, embedding brand messages within unscripted and interactive moments. This shift underscores the need to move beyond reach-based evaluation and towards an understanding of how advertising is enacted through live performance. Each archetype presents unique strategic implications for brand partnerships. Gurus, with their structured performances and controlled delivery, are suitable for credibility-driven campaigns, particularly in technical or niche categories where information-rich endorsements are valued. Their limitations lie in lower interactivity and reduced emotional resonance. Hosts, by contrast, weave advertising into routines and conversational exchanges, making them effective for brands that seek immersion and trust. Here, advertisers must respect the tone of the community to avoid disrupting relational dynamics. Masters enable the deepest affective engagement, creating authentic co-branded experiences that resonate with lifestyle, care, or storytelling values. These collaborations, however, require long-term commitment and trust, as their impact is qualitative rather than immediately scalable. Showmen specialize in high-energy, entertainment-oriented formats that maximize visibility and viral potential. Their improvisations often align with platform spectacles (Buckley et al., 2025)

and performance-driven entertainment logics (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). While powerful for reach, these partnerships offer limited intimacy and less control over message framing.

Taken together, these insights suggest that successful collaborations in livestreaming are shaped less by vanity metrics (e.g., follower count, engagement rate; Campbell & Farrell, 2020) and more by a nuanced understanding of improvisational strategy. By attending to the temporal and relational logics through which streamers operate, advertisers can design more context-sensitive campaigns and establish more sustainable partnerships.

3.7.2 Implication for Streamers

The temporal pressures associated with livestreaming significantly increase the demands on these individuals, heightening the potential for burnout. Unlike other creators, whose persuasive capacity often depends on curated, asynchronous and influencing content, streamers are required to sustain long-term visibility and responsiveness, seamlessly incorporating commercial content without interrupting their delivery. Moreover, they adjust both tone and timing to remain visibly present and emotionally available for their communities, adding pressure on the creator-viewer relationship.

A central skill in navigating these complexities is the ability to perform temporal strategies, not only as a purely organizational function, but also as a relational practice. As streamers' improvisational skills are inseparable from their endurance, their management allow these creators to absorb unpredictability while sustaining relational engagement and branding effectiveness.

Conversely, failure to manage time effectively carries consequences across multiple levels. Individually, streamers are at greater risk of stress, fatigue, and eventual burnout, in part due to tension between their performed character and authentic self, emerging in community engagement, and because of the risk of cannibalization inherent in the livestreaming environment. Professionally, disengagement, irregular presence, or emotional dissonance may undermine the credibility and sustainability of brand partnerships. Developing temporal management as a strategic competence is therefore essential for both creators' personal well-being, and for ensuring the long-term viability of livestream-based advertising collaborations.

3.8 Conclusion

This study has examined how streamers integrate advertising into their performances when operating under the unique constraints of synchronous media, where nothing can be paused, edited, or pre-scripted. By introducing the concept of endurance improvisation, we have advanced a temporal and relational perspective on livestreaming, framing it as a form of hybrid performance that blends continuous presence, emotional connection, and brand endorsement in real time. The typology of four archetypes (Guru, Host, Master, and Showman) offers a novel lens to understand how distinct configurations of Aion, Chronos, and Kairos shape streamers' performances and related advertising integration strategies. While the study provides theoretical and managerial contributions, limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the empirical base is drawn from a purposive sample of Italian Twitch streamers, viewers, and agencies. Cultural and platform-specific dynamics may limit the transferability of the findings to other geographies or livestreaming ecosystems, where audience expectations, platform affordances, and monetization models differ. Future research could adopt cross-cultural comparative designs to test and refine the endurance improvisation framework across diverse contexts.

Second, the qualitative design privileges depth over breadth. Although thematic saturation was achieved, the typology presented here is analytical rather than exhaustive. Streamers may shift between archetypes depending on campaign type, audience composition, or platform incentives. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies could capture these transitions over time and quantify their impact on advertising outcomes.

Third, the study does not address the ethical dimensions of livestreaming advertising, such as transparency of sponsorship disclosure, potential overwork, or the impact of constant visibility on mental health. Integrating critical perspectives from labor studies, media ethics, and consumer protection would enrich our understanding of the sustainability of livestream-based brand collaborations.

By addressing these limitations, future work can further develop the theoretical precision and practical applicability of endurance improvisation, contributing to a more nuanced and globally relevant understanding of advertising in synchronous media environments.

This analysis of endurance improvisation reveals how the temporal management of performance (mediated through Aion, Chronos, and Kairos) constitutes a central mechanism through which streamers sustain engagement, authenticity, and brand collaboration under the continuous exposure of livestreaming. Time becomes not only the medium of performance but the very substance through which relationships are maintained and value is produced. Yet, these temporal strategies and improvisational adjustments do not operate in isolation. They reverberate across multiple levels of the influencer marketing environment, shaping how coordination, collaboration, and visibility are collectively sustained. The same logic that governs individual endurance within live performance also extends to the broader configuration of the influencer ecosystem, where synchrony exerts pressure on all actors (creators, audiences, brands, and platforms) requiring constant negotiation to preserve equilibrium. In this sense, the following chapter expands this temporal lens from the micro and community level to the meso and macro dynamics of the ecosystem, exploring how synchrony, once a performative condition, becomes an organizing force that places the entire system under continuous tension.

While this chapter focuses on the temporal dynamics enacted by individual streamers, the following one extends the analysis to the broader ecosystemic level, examining how these micro-temporal practices aggregate into collective forms of coordination and relational continuity.

Chapter 4

Always On, Never Still: Navigating the Tensions of Value Creation within the Livestreaming Ecosystem

Abstract

Livestreaming is transforming influencer marketing by enabling synchronous, improvised, and extended interactions that disrupt the temporal and relational assumptions of traditional social media. Yet, little is known about how value is created and sustained when interactions unfold in real-time. Adopting an ecosystem perspective, we conceptualize value creation as a spiral dynamic shaped by three core tensions: endurance versus fragility, unpredictability versus control, and specialization versus diversification. Adopting a comprehensive netnographic research design, this study examines how synchrony reshapes coordination and value creation within influencer ecosystems.

We advance value creation research by introducing relational equity, defined as the cumulative value that emerges from the continuous synchronization of interdependent actors. We extend ecosystem theory by demonstrating that synchronous environments rely on intermediaries to coordinate this temporal and relational work, transforming real-time volatility into sustained value.

Finally, we offer actionable insights for brands and platforms seeking to navigate the challenges of livestreaming environments.

4.1 Introduction

The livestreaming phenomenon has emerged as the next frontier in online interactions, reshaping how influencers engage with audiences and how brands embed themselves within digital communities (Ipsos, 2025). Far from being a simple broadcast, it unfolds as a synchronous and extended performance in which streamers sustain prolonged yet immediate interaction with viewers, often for several consecutive hours (Buckley et al., 2025). Originating on Twitch and its synchronous technology, it has rapidly expanded to platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook (Craig & Cunningham, 2019). Livestreaming is reshaping how individuals connect across multiple industries such as entertainment, commerce, sports, and gaming, by foregrounding shared temporality as a central element of the experience (Sjöblom et al., 2019; Wu & Ham, 2025).

Its scale underscores this transformation: by 2024, livestreaming had become the third most-watched category of video content worldwide, following music and viral videos, showing 10% higher engagement than pre-recorded formats (Gyre, 2025). The growing popularity of live contents has also opened new strategic and commercial opportunities for brands, including donations, live commerce, tailored sponsorship, and event-based advertising (Chen, 2021; Kunigita et al., 2023). By 2027, brand investments in livestreaming sponsorship, advertising, and event organization are expected to reach \$3.21 billion (Restream, 2023).

As a sub-context of influencer marketing, livestreaming radically departs from the asynchronous, edited, and strategically distributed interactions that have traditionally characterized social media (Audrezet et al., 2020; Abidin, 2017). While influencer-brand-audience relationships once relied on controlled content flows and predictable temporal rhythms, synchronous environments require immediate, improvised, and long-lasting engagement (Libai et al., 2025; Buckley et al., 2025). This temporal shift alters not only how interactions occur, but also how value is generated and circulated across the broader ecosystem that supports influencers, brands, and platforms.

However, the same features that make livestreaming compelling, its liveness, also render it inherently unpredictable, raising concerns about brand control, alignment, and reputation (Plangger et al., 2021;

Baker et al., 2022). Similar patterns are emerging across digital industries increasingly shaped by synchronous infrastructures, including real-time advertising (e.g., real-time bidding; D’annunzio & Russo, 2024), livestreamed commerce (Zhang et al., 2024), and synchronous broadcasting in sport and esports, such as professional NFL events (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018). These developments signal a broader shift from asynchronous to synchronous digital business ecosystems (DBEs; Senyo et al., 2019; Hrastinski, 2008), in which coordination and performance depend on actors’ ability to adjust in real-time.

This shift demands broader theoretical and managerial perspectives. Existing research in influencer marketing has largely focused on asynchronous contexts where interactions are mediated through edited and strategically distributed content, enabling higher degrees of planning, scripting, and control for brands and influencers (Audrezet et al., 2020; Abidin, 2017; Aw & Agnihotri, 2024; Audrezet et al., 2020). Livestreaming challenges these assumptions by introducing synchronous affordances that make interactions extended, improvised, and volatile, thereby affecting the ecosystem as a whole (Buckley et al., 2025; Wu & Ham, 2025). In synchronous environments, value creation becomes an immediate and demanding process of coordination among actors whose exchanges must be continuously adapted to maintain equilibrium and mutual benefits (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Baker et al., 2022; Viglia et al., 2023).

Livestreaming thus serves as a domain for examining how synchrony redefines coordination and value creation across digital business ecosystems (DBEs; Senyo et al., 2019; Hrastinski, 2008). This raises a set of pressing questions: *what happens in the influencer marketing ecosystem when new technologies emerge and allow real-time, immediate, and long-lasting relationships between influencers and their communities? What are the tensions that the various actors must face to balance the relationships within the ecosystem? How do the various actors manage these tensions?*

To address these shifts, this study adopts an ecosystemic lens and extends Libai et al.’s (2025) equity-based framework to examine how synchronicity transforms value dynamics in influencer marketing. Specifically, we identify three core tensions (endurance versus fragility, unpredictability versus

control, and specialization versus diversification) and theorize how these tensions unfold within a spiral process of rebalancing.

Building on this model, we extend the concept of relational equity to capture the long-term value generated through relationships under real-time pressure. We argue that in synchronous ecosystems, relational equity emerges from continuous synchronization among interdependent actors. We also highlight the central role of intermediaries (moderators, agencies, and creative and business teams) as enablers of temporal coordination who stabilize interactions across community, brand, and platform levels.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We first review the theoretical background on ecosystem and influencer marketing, then present our multi-method qualitative design. We next discuss the findings organized around the three tensions, before introducing the spiral model of value creation and elaborating the concept of relational equity. The paper concludes by outlining the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings, offering guidance for both scholars and practitioners seeking to harness the full potential of livestreaming ecosystems.

4.2 Theoretical background

4.2.1 Ecosystem theory in influencer marketing

Influencer marketing relies on collaborations between brands and social media personalities whose credibility and audience relationships enable them to shape consumer behavior (Alipour et al., 2025; Libai et al., 2025). The ecosystem perspective provides a comprehensive framework to analyze the evolving dynamics within influencer marketing. Drawing on ecological theory, it conceptualizes markets as adaptive systems where multiple actors interact, and value is not created by individual entities but emerges from their reciprocal adjustments over time (Jacobides et al., 2018). This relational understanding of value has informed several domains, including innovation (Adner, 2006), service (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), and business ecosystems (Jacobides et al., 2018).

Digital business ecosystems (DBEs) extend this logic to technology-mediated environments, where platform infrastructures constitute the very conditions of value creation (Tsujiimoto et al., 2019;

Kozinets et al., 2023). Recent studies have applied the DBE perspective to social media (Hanna et al., 2011), digital advertising (Brooks et al., 2021), and influencer marketing (Gurrieri et al., 2023). Within the latter, research highlights the multiplicity of actors and their intertwined goals, from influencer typologies (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023) to audience targeting (Rosário et al., 2023) and triadic collaborations between brands, influencers, and platforms (Libai et al., 2025).

In DBEs, four interdependent features sustain value creation: platforms, symbiosis, co-evolution, and self-organization (Senyo et al., 2019). Platforms provide affordances (ranging from technological tools to algorithmic interfaces) that enable collaboration among actors (Craig & Cunningham, 2019). Platforms further regulate value creation by defining its boundaries. Through evolving policies, algorithms, and disclosure requirements, they determine what forms of visibility, interaction, and commerciality are permissible (Annabell et al., 2024). Emerging monetization models, such as Patreon or Twitch subscriptions, introduce new mechanisms of financial stability but also reinforce the demand for continuous relational effort. Influencers must balance intimacy and transactionality, producing both economic resilience and emotional strain (Hair et al., 2022).

Symbiosis emerges as partners, processes, and technologies become mutually dependent, producing both synergistic value that strengthens the overall system (Adner, 2006) and competition within and across ecosystems (Adner, 2017). Relationships within DBEs oscillate between symbiosis and competition (Gurrieri et al., 2023; Cozzolino et al., 2021), producing temporary states of stability and disruption (Dai et al., 2024). The influencer–platform relationship epitomizes this ambivalence. While influencers rely on platform affordances to expand their reach and visibility, platforms depend on influencers' creative labor to sustain engagement and monetize attention through advertising. These interdependencies generate reciprocal benefits but also asymmetric dependencies that shape the flow of value within the ecosystem. Yet, as Ashman et al. (2025) observe, long-term endurance within ecosystems depends not only on the optimization of collaboration but also on the ability to navigate tensions and manage competition. While self-organization reflects individual actors' capacity to navigate such complexity by coordinating and adapting their practices with others, co-

evolution, in turn, denotes the ecosystem's collective response to internal frictions and external change (Moore, 2006; Senyo et al., 2019). In these complex ecosystems, relationships formation between actors is facilitated by intermediaries: bridge-actors that, depending on their position and function, sustain collaboration and coherence to facilitate the value creation across primary actors (Scholz, 2020; Soberón et al., 2022; Axelsson 2024; Thach et al. 2024).

Building on this foundation, we next examine how value circulates through equity-based relations among ecosystem actors, with the aim of mapping the ecosystem's co-evolution under the temporal pressure of synchronicity.

4.2.2 Equity-based dynamics in influencer ecosystems

Libai et al. (2025) conceptualize the value creation process, within influencer marketing, through a three-dimensional model that connects the strategic interdependencies among brands, influencers, and platforms. Customer equity represents firm-level benefits generated through enhanced Customer Lifetime Value; follower equity captures the symbolic and financial capital accumulated by influencers through engagement and monetization; and user equity reflects the value that platforms derive from sustained attention and participation. Together, these dimensions articulate the multiple pathways through which value is produced and redistributed across the ecosystem.

Although analytically distinct, these domains are fluid in practice, continuously negotiated among actors, technological infrastructures, and audience behaviors. Platform design, content format, and algorithmic visibility shape how equity is accrued and converted across the system. Influencer attributes (credibility, attractiveness, and perceived similarity) act as critical mediators of these exchanges, as does the degree of psychological and social congruence with audiences (Argyris et al., 2020). The rise of micro-influencers illustrates this contingency: smaller followings can yield higher engagement, challenging the assumption that size directly equates to impact (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). However, even proximity itself can be precarious. When followers perceive dissonance between an influencer's projected authenticity and their actual responsiveness, relational bonds can deteriorate into disappointment, criticism, or even anti-fandom, generating negative spillovers that

extend to associated brands (Ouvrein et al., 2021; Mardon et al., 2025). These vulnerabilities are magnified in commercial collaborations, where creative autonomy, brand–persona alignment, and authenticity perceptions become decisive (Kapitan et al., 2022; Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2022). Sponsored content often attracts greater scrutiny than organic communication (Chung et al., 2023), yet appeals to social intimacy or shared identity can mitigate skepticism by embedding the message within relational closeness (Lou, 2022).

Brand equity further modulates these outcomes. Partnerships with high-equity brands tend to reinforce influencer credibility and strengthen consumer responses, while low-equity or incongruent brands may produce boomerang effects that erode both brand and influencer trustworthiness (Rathjens et al., 2024). Among highly attached consumers, endorsements can even be experienced as norm violations, leading to reduced willingness to pay or disengagement from the brand (Bentley et al., 2025). The perceived transparency of endorsements also plays a central role: ambiguous disclosures or suspicions of false sponsorships can rapidly deplete accumulated trust and weaken relational capital (Hudders et al., 2021b).

Overall, these dynamics underscore that influencer ecosystems operate through fragile equilibria. Equity is not a stable outcome but a fluctuating condition, continuously reshaped by platform affordances, actor interdependencies, and evolving audience expectations. The ecosystem perspective thus highlights a paradox at the core of DBEs: the very relational mechanisms that generate customer, follower, and user equity can also expose the system to volatility and decline. When actors fail to adapt collectively to shifts in technological infrastructures or in the configuration of the ecosystem itself, the co-evolutionary momentum that sustains DBEs dissipates, transforming adaptability into ecosystem collapse (Senyo et al., 2019). These fragile equilibria provide the backdrop for understanding how livestreaming technologies further disrupt value creation processes.

4.2.3 Livestreaming and the Temporal Shift in Influencer Ecosystems

While the equity-based model provides a structured view of value flows within influencer ecosystems, it primarily considers asynchronous interaction where participants are not assumed to be

online at the same time. In fact, traditional influencer marketing has largely been conceptualized as a set of strategic performances that are curated, planned, and optimized to align with commercial objectives while preserving a semblance of authenticity across platforms, staged through controlled mediation rather than lived interaction (Audrezet et al., 2020; Abidin, 2017; Aw & Agnihotri, 2024; Audrezet et al., 2020).

The emergence of livestreaming, however, disrupts this logic by introducing a fundamentally different temporal and relational order, one that unfolds in real-time (Hrastinski, 2008) and resists full managerial control. It redefines how influencers engage with audiences and how brands embed themselves within participatory communities (Buckley et al., 2025; Meisner & Ledbetter, 2022). Platforms, such as Twitch, enable live performances in which streamers simultaneously produce and consume content with their viewers. Through chat exchanges, donations, and spontaneous reactions, these encounters generate a heightened sense of co-presence, immediacy, and mutual recognition (Sjöblom et al., 2019; Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018).

In contrast to the asynchronous rhythms of traditional social media, livestreaming relationships are developed not through edited fragments of life but through shared duration: hours of ongoing interaction in which presence itself becomes the medium of value (Buckley et al., 2025; Wu & Ham, 2025). This synchronous immersion fosters perceptions of authenticity and emotional proximity, converting time spent together into a source of experiential and symbolic worth (Wu et al., 2023).

Affordances play a central role in shaping these dynamics. As Craig & Cunningham (2019) argue, platform affordances define the possibilities for action that enable or constrain user behavior. TikTok privileges humor and music-driven short-form content; Instagram cultivates aesthetic curation and narrative coherence through visual storytelling (Haenlein et al., 2020); Twitch, by contrast, exemplifies synchronous affordances, enabling direct, real-time engagement through live chat, gifting, and subscriptions. These features amplify perceptions of authenticity, emotional connection, and relational credibility between streamers and their audiences (Buckley et al., 2025).

Beyond technical architecture, affordances are enacted differently by users who mobilize them for utilitarian, hedonic, or socially connective purposes (Chen et al., 2021a). Algorithmic visibility, platform vernaculars, and monetization mechanisms collectively delineate the conditions under which influencers, brands, and audiences interact, negotiate, and evolve (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). From a commercial perspective, this immediacy expands the influencer's revenue architecture through live commerce, sponsorships, donations, and direct audience patronage (Chen, 2021; Kunigita et al., 2023; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019; Partin, 2020), blurring the boundaries between consumption, support, and co-creation.

Yet these same conditions intensify uncertainty and emotional effort: streamers must continuously balance entertainment, authenticity, and commercial integration in a high-stakes environment (Liu et al., 2025; Gong et al., 2022; Buckley et al., 2025). Within such contexts, value creation becomes inseparable from the temporal effort of sustaining presence, an ongoing negotiation between spontaneity and strategy, endurance and exhaustion.

Collectively, prior research has illuminated how influencer ecosystems operate through interdependent actors, equity-based dynamics, and platform affordances (Annabell et al., 2024; Lou, 2022; Tafesse & Wood, 2022). Yet, most studies remain anchored in asynchronous contexts, treating value creation as a stable and manageable flow. Livestreaming disrupts these assumptions by introducing synchronous, improvised, and extended interactions that amplify unpredictability and relational fragility (Wu et al., 2023; Buckley et al., 2025). Existing equity frameworks thus fail to account for how real-time technologies destabilize traditional coordination and challenge the predictability of co-creation.

Building on these gaps, the present study investigates how synchronous technologies reconfigure influencer ecosystems. Specifically, it explores the tensions that emerge when activities cannot be deferred but must be enacted, negotiated, and concluded in real-time. By focusing on the mechanisms through which different actors sustain equity under these conditions, we seek to illuminate how value is created and continually rebalanced within the temporal immediacy of livestreaming environments.

4.3 Methodology

4.3.1 Procedure

Our research adopted a comprehensive netnographic methodological approach, which also incorporates an interactive movement involving ethnographic engagement and in-depth interviews. Netnography provided the most adequate unifying methodological framework to investigate the cultural meanings, social norms, and interactional dynamics shaping behavior in techno-mediated environments and technocultural contexts (Kozinets, 2020; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024) such as the livestreaming ecosystem.

In our netnography research design, immersion and investigation provided a situated, culturally-rich, telescopic perspective on the phenomenon, unpacking infrastructural dynamics and actor interdependencies, within which interaction unfolded dynamically and constituted the microscopic lens through which participants' lived experiences emerged (Kozinets, 2020; Gretzel, 2021). In particular, ethnographic engagement offered additional insights by enabling us to capture participants' practices and interpretations across both online and offline contexts (Belk, 1990; Kozinets et al., 2017), while semi-structured interviews allowed us to access respondents' experiences, emotional orientations, and reflective accounts (Kucuk, 2020).

Our major data site was Twitch, the leading gaming-oriented social media platform. Twitch was selected as a strategic field site (Merton, 1987) due to its open infrastructure and the density of relational, performative, and commercial interactions it fosters among streamers, communities, and brands. We focused specifically on game streamers, whose hybrid and flexible content formats, ranging from gameplay to "IRL" (In Real Life) sessions and branded content, offered a fertile ground for exploring questions of performativity, branding, and ecosystemic coordination (Taylor, 2018).

In line with the immersion framework outlined by Kozinets and Gretzel (2024), our approach was structured around the researchers' prolonged and active engagements with the field. Immersion was based on a continuous condition of cultural familiarization with the context, based on situated inquiry, contextual experience, positionality awareness and reflexive thinking aimed at developing a

thorough, contextualized cultural understanding of the livestreaming ecosystem. The first author conducted long-term observations and engagements with livestreams and community interactions. We all then systematically discussed, decoded and enriched understanding of these contexts in research meetings, developing what Kozinets and Gretzel (2024) describe as a deep cultural attunement. This process involved repeated exposure to the field, reflexive reasoning about social interactions, and the cultivation of cultural fluency across diverse actor networks.

Throughout this process, we maintained a reflexive immersion journal (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024) to record “deep data” (data that are evocative, rich, meaningful, revelatory and highly relevant to the research questions, see Kozinets, 2020; Gambetti & Kozinets, 2022), interpretive insights, emotional reactions, and contextual reflections. The journal acted as as a curated methodological chronicle of the multiple encounters of the researchers with data that integrated multimodal types of digital traces (e.g., textual, visual, and audiovisual) (Kozinets, 2020). Moreover, it acted as a personal diary of the researchers combining their reflexive introspection and hermeneutic interpretation incorporated into analytical, emotional and reflexive notes (Gambetti, 2021), enabling transparency across all research stages (Belk, 1990). The researchers oscillated between empathic participation and critical distance, maintaining awareness of their positionality within the livestreaming communities under study. Emotional resonance was not treated as a bias to be mitigated but as an interpretive resource that deepened cultural understanding and strengthened credibility (Belk, 1990).

The immersion movement also involved the perusal of archival materials such as industry reports, Twitch documentation, and gaming media, as well as the observation and the experience of commercial meetings involving brands and talent agencies. These activities helped map and structure the ecosystemic configurations relevant to our research questions and guided subsequent investigation and interaction.

The investigation movement involved systematic online observation and focused data collection, involving searching, discovering and saving digital traces (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024) related to

online livestreaming sections and communities' conversations on Twitch and Discord platforms. In this movement we observed and recorded public interactions and chat exchanges across livestreams. Given the synchronous and transient nature of livestreaming, data collection was conducted in real time, often paralleling content creation. This simultaneity allowed us to capture and record ephemeral events as they unfolded, representing a core dimension of our methodological approach through which we adapted our netnographic research procedures to the emergent technocultural features of the phenomenon (Kozinets, 2020).

The interaction movement extended the investigation through dialogic and participatory engagement to get a deeper microscopic glance on how the interactions among the livestreaming ecosystem actors play out, are negotiated and are managed. In the interaction movement we not only captured data but directly elicited additional data through active interactions and engagements. In total, we actively participated in over 30 hours of livestreaming sessions, including 20 hours dedicated to gaming livestreams and 10 hours to IRL sessions (e.g., Just Chatting), exchanging comments and eliciting conversation. We also engaged 5 hours in participative community chat threads on Discord. Moreover, we attended three offline events over three years: Milano Games Week (2022), Comicon Bergamo (2023), and Lucca Comics and Games (2024), as well as several partner meetings involving brands, influencers, agencies, and managers where we actively interacted with the attendees to collect additional insights. These moments of active ethnographic immersion (Belk, 1990) extended the virtual field into physical environments, allowing us a deeper understanding of how actors forge commercial and affective relationships within the livestreaming industry. A summary of these observational activities is presented in Table 5.

In parallel, we conducted 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 23 and 138 minutes. Participants were selected through snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019), starting with referrals from talent agencies and personal networks. This allowed us to map the relational structure of the ecosystem (Noy, 2008) and to ensure maximum variation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Activity	Site	Actors observed	Topics	Obs length (hrs)
LS session (Twitch)	Online	Streamer; mods; viewers	Gaming	20
LS session (Twitch)	Online	Streamer; mods; viewers	IRL	10
Community chat (Discord)	Online	Streamer; mods; viewers	Gaming + IRL	5
Event (MGW; Comicon; Lucca C&G)	In-person	Streamer; mods; viewers; agencies; brands	Meet&Greet + educational panels	32
Partner Meetings	In-person	Agencies; brands	Event planning & management	8

Table 5 *Summary of data collected*

The final sample consisted of thirteen Twitch-verified streamers (S), six moderators (M) involved in content and community management, five long-term viewers (V) selected for their deep engagement with reference streamers, and four agency (A) representatives offering commercial insights. All interviews were conducted between January 2023 and April 2025 with Italian respondents, following a semi-structured protocol that encouraged open, detailed responses and first-hand narratives.

The main themes explored concerned participants' self-positioning within the ecosystem and their perceived roles. We also examined how participants related to other actors, exploring interpersonal, emotional, symbolic, commercial, and strategic dynamics. The final sample of 28 participants provided extensive insights, allowing us to reach thematic saturation (Saunders et al., 2018).

4.3.2 Data analysis and interpretation

Building on the immersive, investigative, and interactive data collected through our netnographic framework, we conducted an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) complemented by a cultural analysis (Kozinets, 2020) to examine the symbolic practices, meaning structures, and relational tensions that characterize the livestreaming ecosystem.

Respondents	Age	Gender	Interview Length (min)	Twitch subscription (in yrs)	Average viewers (all time)	Total followers
S1	33	M	55	11	107	47.8K
S2	30	F	57	10	337	608K
S3	32	M	63+96	13	548	171K
S4	27	F	46	5	241	27.4 K
S5	23	M	58	7	53	61.1 K
S6	30	M	32	13	1218	461 K
S7	30	M	52	11	191	33.9K
S8	33	M	53	5	42	7.4 K
S9	30	F	30	5	500	162 K
S10	33	M	43	11	45	35.5 K
S11	36	F	66	12	149	26.0 K
S12	30	F	42	6	94	17.8 K
S13	27	M	45	4	745	27.7 K
V1	33	M	138	12		
V2	32	M	103	5		
V3	33	M	86	13		
V4	51	F	40	3		
V5	36	M	33	6		
V6	35	M	53	13		
V7	50	M	60	7		
A1	33	M	53	6		
A2	28	M	40	4		
A3	28	M	49	7		
A4	45	M	44	7		

Table 6 Respondents' profiles

In line with Kozinets and Gretzel (2024), the analysis moved beyond description toward cultural interpretation, aiming to uncover the shared meanings, values, and symbolic codes that shape social participation in synchronous digital contexts. Data analysis unfolded iteratively, beginning with an

exhaustive reading of transcripts, notes, and journal entries, followed by open coding to identify preliminary patterns of interaction, identity work, and temporal negotiation among actors. These initial codes were iteratively refined into broader interpretive categories, allowing us to connect recurrent ideas and symbolic tensions across datasets.

Interpretation was approached as a hermeneutic process (Thompson et al., 1994; Thompson, 1997), characterized by continuous movement between data and theory. Reflexive immersion journals supported this circular movement by mapping interpretive shifts and emotional responses, integrating firsthand experiences with theoretical abstractions (Geertz, 1973; Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Kozinets, 2020).

To ensure credibility and interpretive rigor (Belk et al., 2012), we applied methodological triangulation across all data forms (interviews, field notes, platform interactions, and immersion journaling) validating insights through multi-source convergence. Regular discussions within the research team ensured analytic coherence, while selective participant engagement supported the plausibility and resonance of interpretations (Belk, 1990).

Through the integration of immersive presence, investigative rigor, and interactive dialogue, this methodological design provided a holistic understanding of how synchronous digital ecosystems operate. The combination of reflexivity, affective involvement, and triangulation enhanced both the credibility and cultural depth of interpretation, ensuring alignment with contemporary standards of qualitative inquiry in consumer and media research.

4.4 Findings

The synchronous nature of livestreaming reveals an ecosystem in constant motion, where visibility, engagement, and performance unfold in real-time and rarely settle into equilibrium. Within this flux, we observed a series of recurring tensions that shape how value is created, shared, and sustained among interconnected actors. Drawing from our data, three core tensions emerged (endurance versus fragility, unpredictability versus control, and specialization versus diversification) each reflecting a

different layer of instability within the livestreaming environment. These layers progressively expand from the community gathered around the streamer to the brand and to the industry.

The tensions we identified do not appear as independent categories but as movements that spiral outward, originating from the streamer's individual struggle for presence and progressively involving broader circles of participation, from communities to brands and agencies. As the ecosystem oscillates between moments of stability and collapse, its actors develop adaptive practices to cope with uncertainty: sustaining continuous presence, improvising interaction under pressure, and anchoring fleeting experiences into more durable forms. A synthesis of the findings is provided in Table 7.

Tension	Description	Adaptive Mechanisms	Actors Involved
Endurance vs Fragility	Livestreaming unfolds as a continuous performance that exposes streamers to physical and emotional strain. The need to maintain constant presence collides with human limits, producing cycles of exhaustion and recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustaining daily presence through scheduled streams and ritualized routines • Sharing exhaustion and vulnerability with viewers to convert fatigue into relational value • Delegating interaction to moderators during overload phases 	Streamers, moderators, community members
Unpredictability vs Control	The improvisational nature of livestreaming creates unpredictable interactions that can escalate into reputational or commercial risk for brands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiated improvisation during live sessions • Agency-driven guidelines and safety protocols • Long-term collaborations replacing one-shot campaigns 	Streamers, brands, agencies, moderators
Specialization vs Diversification	Livestreaming's liveness limits the temporal reach of content, challenging creators to preserve visibility and value over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repurposing highlights and clips across platforms • Building support teams (editors, managers, technicians) • Diversifying activities into offline events and personal ventures 	Streamers, creative and business teams, brands, managers, agencies, platforms

Table 7 *Summary of findings*

4.4.2 Community-level tension: navigating between endurance and fragility

Livestreaming unfolds as a choreography of simultaneity: speech, movement, gaze, and performance compressed into a single frame. The streamer sits before the camera, lit by the soft glow of multiple screens, while the chat scrolls endlessly, demanding attention, reaction, and humor. Even those who seem to navigate the flow with ease are caught in a constant negotiation with time, balancing rhythm, entertainment, and the weight of expectation. The pressure of the live moment defines the pace of their existence on screen.

As one streamer explained, *“It’s one thing when you’re at a bar; talking with friends, and everyone has their turn to speak; it’s another when you’re the center and everyone is listening to you. It’s like constantly doing something, but at the same time you’re performing, and while performing you’re playing video game, and while playing you’re thinking about the chat, checking if everything is working. Because you’re your own director, your own manager, the actor, the one who handles lights and sound—it’s not just one thing [...] it’s not very healthy.”*

Their struggle lies in coordinating all these layers in real time, with little room to think, feel, or rest. The “while” becomes a recurring mantra among streamers: a phrase that captures both the multitasking frenzy of the medium and the endurance labor it demands. Each gesture (reading, speaking, reacting, smiling) carries the awareness that time online is currency, and presence must be continuous to remain valuable.

Because their income depends primarily on direct viewer donations, online presence becomes an obligation rather than a choice. Missing a session not only reduces their earnings but also threatens the fragile bond with followers. Absence breeds disappointment and abandonment; audiences drift easily from one channel to another, turning loyalty into competition. Streamers, in turn, push themselves toward the limits of physical and emotional resistance to preserve visibility and connection. Viewers share in these moments of endurance. They reward persistence with generosity, celebrating fatigue as proof of authenticity. Donations often arrive when the streamer appears visibly drained, hands trembling, eyes half-closed. Yet, rather than diminishing the experience, exhaustion

becomes its most valuable currency. The public’s empathy, expressed through messages of encouragement, laughter, or shared sleeplessness, transforms vulnerability into worth. Disclosing one’s physical and emotional state is not only a relational practice but also a symbolic validation of value that leverages on acts of strategic intimacy, whereby streamers show their fragility and strength to the community: being exhausted but being there.

Within this emotionally intensified embodied practice, streamers find a sense of relief in their community’s participation and support. Streamers’ body becomes both the medium and the message, co-managed by the chat’s constant flow of words and emojis. Following justified or unjustified absences, many undertake compensatory actions (so-called “marathons”) that extend the performance far beyond its intended limits. These events are driven by public engagement: each donation, comment, or challenge fuels the length of the stream, transforming exhaustion into collective spectacle (Figure 13).

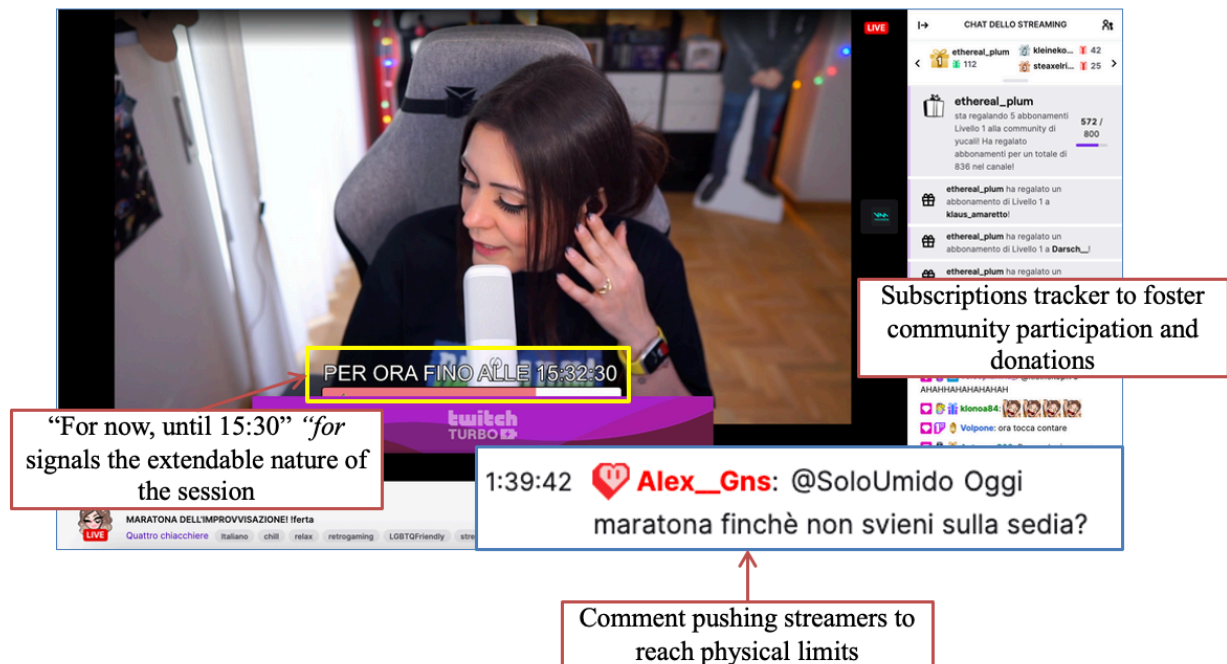


Figure 13 Example of a streamer’s marathon that ended up in lasting 13 hours

During these marathons, the camera never rests. Screens flicker in the half-light, keyboards click in irregular rhythm, and the chat surges like a pulse that refuses to slow down. The streamer’s body

becomes both stage and instrument, stretching through sleepless hours as emotion, gameplay, and audience blur together. Moderators, close friends, or long-standing followers, step in quietly, keeping the current alive when the streamer's focus falters. A message pinned, a joke sent at the right time, a reminder to breathe are small gestures that sustain the illusion of perpetual motion (Figure 14).

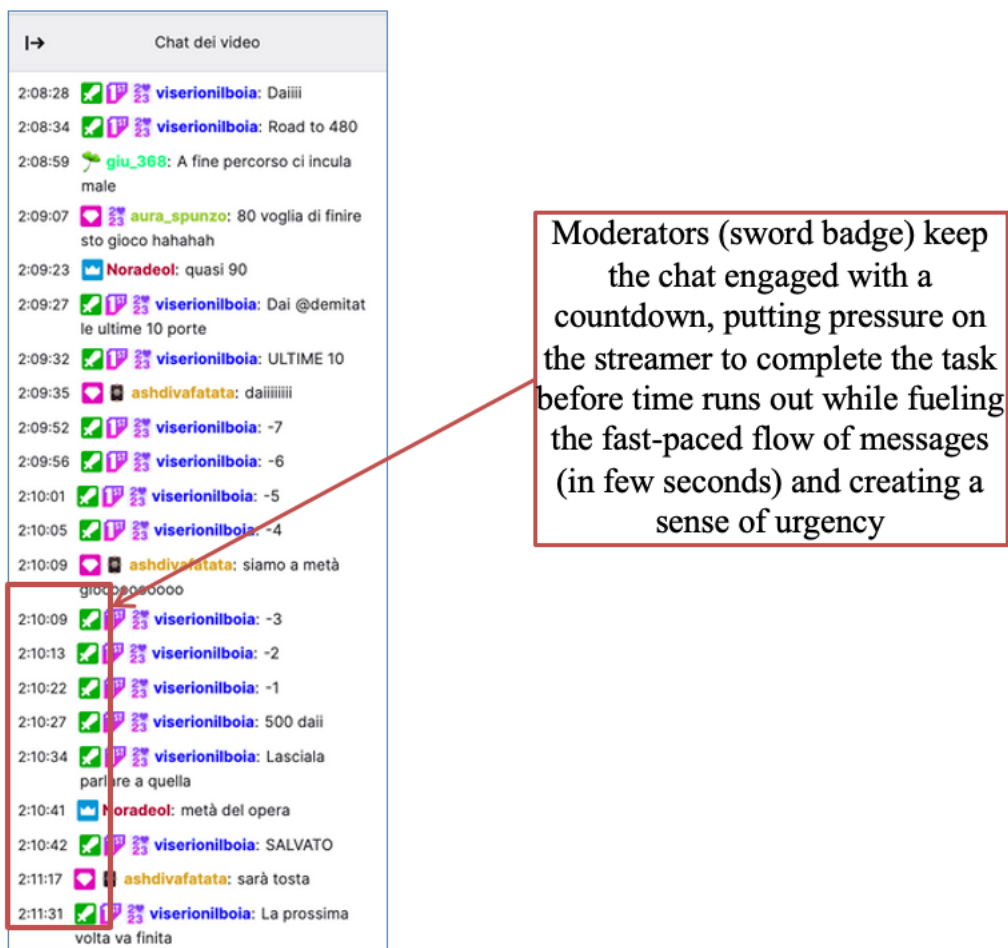


Figure 14 A moderator fostering engagement on the behalf of the streamer

Through these micro-acts, presence is redistributed. Streamers delegate visibility to others, trading control for continuity, while moderators assume partial authorship of the stream, ensuring the flow of interaction, donations, and attention. Moreover, some moderators operate in teams with internal hierarchies and fixed shifts, guaranteeing coverage during the long hours of live sessions. In this circular economy of audience pleasing, streamers cede content creation to the community and their very presence to moderators, losing autonomy but gaining engagement and income.

Here, follower equity takes shape not only through the quality of content or community involvement but through the intensity of shared responsiveness. There are no pre-scripted parts, only the physical and mental expenditure of the streamer, exchanged for participation and affection. Hence, what begins as individual effort gradually turns into community strain, as strategic intimacy sustains exhaustion through the shared act of staying awake together, in real time.

4.4.3 Brand-level tension: navigating between unpredictability and control

Because livestreaming unfolds on the fly, the improvisation of content and discourse becomes an inherent condition of performance, one that most directly affects the brands involved. In this real-time ecosystem, brand equity is not the result of a dyadic interaction between influencer and follower, but a co-created, unpredictable outcome that materializes moment by moment within the community. Strong cohesion fuels enjoyment for participants but also produces a flow of unscripted content (Fig. 4), highly prone to escalation and reputational risk. As one agency professional warned, *“They [the chats] are a crowd. If someone says something offensive or controversial, the entire chat turns, and you [the brand] stop making any revenue.”* (A3)

At this stage, the streamer’s attitude becomes decisive. Some creators remain acutely aware of their commercial partners, carefully moderating their tone, while others let the energy of the chat dictate the direction of the stream. For brands, this creates a constant tension: they know what product will appear on screen but never how it will be narrated. The same pressure reverberates on the creators’ side. Since few can survive on donations alone, brand partnerships are essential for their professionalization, yet they also add another layer of performance to manage that must balance entertainment, persona, and commercial responsibility.

Failing to maintain this balance can make the entire system collapse. Losing control during a live session can trigger sanctions or even result in a ban from the platform, an event that not only jeopardizes the streamer’s livelihood but also endangers the brand’s investment. The extinction of a channel means both reputational backlash and financial loss, revealing how deeply brand survival becomes intertwined with human endurance.

In this tense configuration, agencies emerge as the necessary mediators between both worlds. For brands, they act as buffers, containing reputational risk and coordinating campaigns; for streamers, they function as mentors, offering guidelines and behavioral advice to make their personas more commercially viable. One representative shared with us an agency document that illustrates this process. They provide brands a table that classifying each streamer according to safety and uncertainty in collaborations. It indicates those creators with a generally positive or neutral tone, and attentive to sponsors, as safer and marketable. On the other hand, another color signals potential unpredictability: streamers who might steer the chat toward controversy or risk.

Yet these metrics alone rarely suffice. Agencies complement them with content tags: broad indicators that map the themes and tones typical of a streamer's broadcasts. These tags help brands identify suitable partners and anticipate possible misalignments. They also include cross-platform metrics (such as total followers on YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok), numbers that, while irrelevant to live interaction, reassure marketers accustomed to measurable reach. Beyond filtering, agencies negotiate long-term collaborations that weave brands into the fabric of everyday content, shifting from one-shot sponsorships to ongoing presence. In doing so, they act as guarantors of reliability for both parties: ensuring that brands make targeted investments while allowing streamers to act spontaneously and maintain coherence with their persona. As one agency explained: *"There's a creator of ours, for example, who mainly streams League of Legends but is an incredible coffee enthusiast. He started a morning show on Twitch about coffee. And he said: since I go live in the morning, I might as well start when I'm making my coffee, so I share that passion with my audience too. He makes coffee in an extremely manual way, with very expensive tools: he really has a passion, a culture. He started to spread it, and this gave him the opportunity to collaborate with companies in the coffee sector[...] it's very tied to personal passions."*

These collaborations reveal that, by grounding partnerships in the streamer's personal routines and enthusiasms, agencies manage to reconcile spontaneity and sponsorship, transforming passions into

viable commercial narratives while preserving the sense of everyday intimacy that sustains community trust.

Agencies also operate as physical connectors during offline events such as Milano Games Week (2022) and Comicon Bergamo (2023). In these contexts, they host streamers in dedicated booths, coordinate Meet & Greet, and manage brand–consumer interactions on site. Their role extends from digital mediation to embodied intermediation. As one streamer acknowledged, *“If it weren’t for the agency, all streamers—all creators—would be working much, much, much, much less.”* (S2)

Together, these practices generate a form of negotiated improvisation: streamers learn to navigate the unpredictability of live discourse with growing awareness of their behavioral responsibility, while agencies institutionalize spontaneity, translating it into calculable, manageable risk. Brand partnerships, in turn, expand across multiple platforms, extending this fragile coordination beyond the stream itself. What results is a system of continuous balancing, where creativity and control coexist uneasily, and where the value extracted by platforms and brands depends on the delicate synchronization of all players involved.

4.4.4 Industry-level tension: navigating between specialization and diversification

Until now, the livestreaming ecosystem has been contained within the temporal boundaries of the live session. Stabilization thus becomes necessary before the system can extend outward. Because the streamer’s presence, community interaction, and brand display all exist within the limits of the live event, a pressing question emerges: how can these contents endure once the stream ends? The pressure weighing on the entire ecosystem is directly tied to long-term presence and to the ability of its actors to sustain relationships beyond the immediacy of the medium.

Unlike other platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok (whose algorithms continuously recommend content), livestreaming platforms like Twitch still lack such supportive infrastructures. Without algorithmic reinforcement, streamers must generate their own visibility, increasing the pressure on all actors involved and directly eroding what could be called their user equity.

This strain is partially alleviated through content diversification across external platforms. By repurposing highlights, memes, and emotional clips from live sessions, streamers circulate their Twitch content across asynchronous environments, enhancing cross-platform visibility and building user equity across both synchronous and asynchronous spaces (Figure 15). This practice enables live content to travel, extending its lifespan and creating new opportunities for commercial independence. Yet, managing the additional workload for other platforms pushes streamers to the edge, once again threatening the balance and sustainability of the ecosystem.

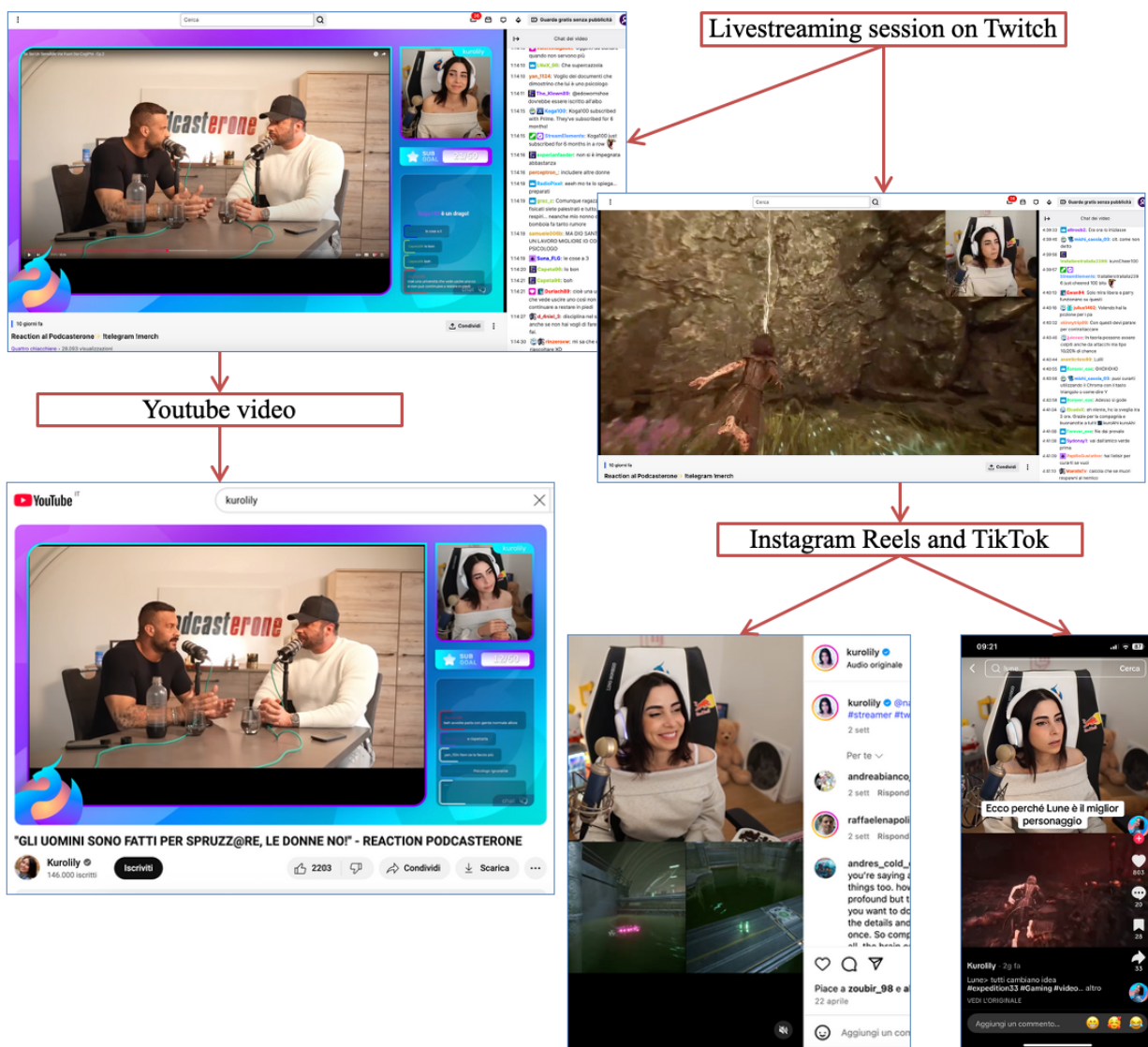


Figure 15 Strategic use of live content across platforms

To overcome this tension, many creators build micro-teams of editors, social media managers, and technicians who sustain visibility and nurture community loyalty over time. As one streamer

explained, *“We tried to include editors, video makers, and so on, to create content also on other platforms. [...] You grow bigger and bigger and make people want to reopen your life every day is the most difficult thing.”* (S14)

Unlike agencies, these creative collaborators follow streamers closely in their daily operational routines, offering both technical and emotional support. Their presence (alongside moderators and agencies) marks the passage from amateur to professional. As one agency noted, *“This line between success and failure is thin, because success really lasts very little, the market is saturated [...] Not everyone manages to stay afloat, and it is thanks to the influencer [referring to a streamer] who has worked across many other platforms, such as Twitch and Instagram. But one must be skilled; many people move toward television, toward theater. [...] It is necessary to maintain a completely clean profile with consistent publishing at set times and days, along with a certain degree of effectiveness from a commercial standpoint.”* (A2)

Through these mechanisms, streamers extend their activities beyond live performance, turning synchronous presence into asynchronous circulation. They diversify their content across digital platforms and physical spaces, transforming digital equity into tangible visibility. This diversification often materializes in new entrepreneurial or institutional roles: managers advise them in launching personal projects (such as merchandise lines, educational programs, or consulting initiatives) and in transitioning to public roles as TV hosts, commentators, or brand spokespersons. At events like Lucca Comics & Games 2024 and Milano Games Week 2022, some streamers acted as casters for professional matches or as on-stage entertainers, embodying the continuity between digital and embodied influence.

Together, these anchoring strategies (building support teams, diversifying formats, and expanding into new domains) allow streamers to transform ephemeral performances into durable value.

Taken together, the three tensions reveal how the livestreaming ecosystem sustains itself over time. What begins as an individual struggle for presence evolves into collective mechanisms of adaptation (Figure 16). Through strategic intimacy, negotiated improvisation, and anchoring tactics, actors

progressively stabilize an ecosystem that must constantly renegotiate its equilibrium between presence and absence, liveness and longevity, exhaustion and endurance.

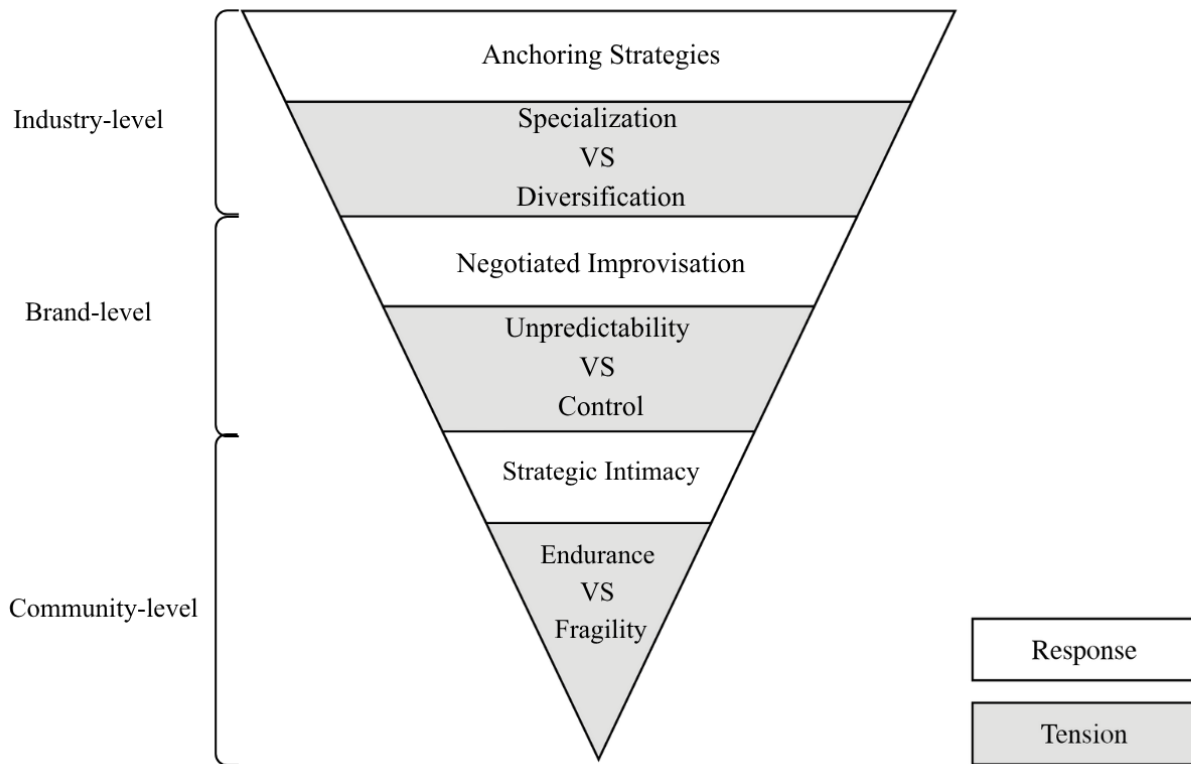


Figure 16 Visual representation of the livestreaming ecosystem

4.5 Discussion

4.5.1 Theoretical contributions: Advancing value creation in ecosystem theory

Relational equity in synchronous ecosystems

Our findings reveal that the affordances of livestreaming platforms, and particularly the synchrony they enable, play a central role in how value is created and sustained.

Yet, as our analysis indicates, the value generated through synchronous exchanges extends far beyond economic interest. It is intrinsically relational, emerging not only within the community but across all actors of the ecosystem through interdependent connections.

At the community level, the delegation of presence, where streamers distribute attention between moderators, viewers, and the self, reveals how synchrony transforms individual fatigue into a collective effort. This distributed engagement can be read as value-in-relationship (Ravald &

Grönroos 1996), where value emerges from mutual exchange among participants (streamer–moderator, streamer–viewer, viewer–viewer). Although grounded in dyadic interactions, the simultaneity of these exchanges unfolds through a collective and distributed logic of coordination, extending prior ecosystem research that positions synchrony as a key condition for value co-creation among interdependent actors who are together in time even if not in the same space (Hrastinski 2008; Akaka et al. 2012).

Together, these dynamics suggest a progression from *synchrony* as temporal condition (Andersen, 2008; Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2019), to *synchronization* as an ongoing process of coordination, and finally to *relational equity* as the cumulative outcome of such alignment.

Building on this, we extend the notion of relational equity, defined as the long-term wealth potential embedded in enduring relationships (Sawhney & Zabin 2002), to synchronous ecosystems such as livestreaming. In these settings, the potential of relational equity becomes actualized through the continuous alignment of actors who must sustain interactions in real-time and over an extended timescale. Building relational equity requires managing both synchrony and endurance in sustaining, nurturing, and adapting relationships to preserve the viability of the whole system (Sawhney & Zabin 2002; Muldoon et al., 2024), thus becoming the central mechanism of stabilization.

Whereas stability in asynchronous influencer ecosystems typically derives from pre-planned strategies and permanent resources that buffer uncertainty (Poblete et al. 2022; Gurrieri et al. 2023; Audrezet et al. 2020), livestreaming presents the opposite condition: uncertainty itself must be managed in real-time and over extended duration. Actors first navigate instability to survive synchrony and only later adopt asynchronous strategies to sustain it, thereby reversing the temporal logic that typically underpins influencer ecosystem. Stability and survival in synchronous environments depend on the endurance capacity to engage in an ongoing labor of synchronization, a process that is both a structural condition and a collective accomplishment. Synchrony creates the very instability that actor must manage over extended spans; synchronization, in turn, becomes the mechanism through which this volatility is transformed into continuity.

Building on Low & Johnston's (2006) idea of synchronization of relationship expectations as the logics underpinning the value-in-relationship, we extend this concept to the ecosystem level. The alignment of interdependent actors concerns not only their simultaneous presence (Harastinski, 2008; Vargo & Lusch 2012), but unfolds through a nonlinear spiral dynamic in which mutual expectations and interaction recursively enable new forms of resource integration and value creation (Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2019; Gummesson & Mele, 2010). As Blagoev & Schreyögg (2019) show, this spiral dynamic is not merely iterative but temporal: stability is continuously reproduced through the mutual adjustment of expectations and rhythms, turning temporal coordination into the very source of sustained value. Through this lens, relational equity captures the co-evolutionary value of synchronous DBEs: streamers, brands, and platforms leverage social relationships to collectively align expectations and actions under temporal pressure, establishing a spiral and long-form pattern of relational coordination (Gittell, 2006; Senyo et al., 2019).

Intermediaries as enablers of relational equity

To actualize the wealth potential of relationship equity, the findings highlight the crucial role of intermediaries (moderators, agencies, and creative and business teams) as coordinators across ecosystem layers (Soberón et al., 2022; Axelsson 2024) by accounting for the temporal dimension (Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2019).

At the community level, moderators perform both communicative and collaborative mediation, transforming temporal tension into cohesion through ongoing affective and communicative adjustment (Cai & Wohn 2022; Jodén & Strandell, 2022). At the brand level, agencies institutionalize improvisation, translating spontaneous collaboration into contractual and reputational stability (Gurrieri et al. 2023). At the platform level, creative and business teams (such as editors, technicians, and social media managers; Kozinets et al., 2023) extend the lifespan of synchronicity itself, helping in transforming a single performance into extended visibility: a key driver of influencers' diversification (Goanta, 2021; Zabel 2024).

As Blagoev and Schreyögg (2019) show in their study of high-tempo work systems, stability is not a static property but a temporal accomplishment, continuously reproduced through the mutual adjustment of actors' expectations and rhythms. In synchronous ecosystems, this temporal mediation is distributed across intermediaries, who perform comparable stabilizing work across community, brand, and platform boundaries. Their interventions realign rhythms, buffer volatility, and translate conflicting temporal demands into coherent sequences of action, enabling the ecosystem to sustain performance over time. The multiplicity of their roles underscores their collective importance for the stability of synchronous systems, where alignment is not episodic but continuous and shared. The tensions embedded in the spiral logic of value creation can only be absorbed through their ongoing stabilizing work. This perspective extends Libai et al.'s (2025) equity-based framework by introducing intermediaries as the connective infrastructure that sustain relational equity across-actor layer of value. Rather than replacing follower, customer, and user equity, each anchored to specific stakeholders, it operates as a distributed layer that sustains and binds them over time.

Enduring stability in livestreaming does not rely on the individual persistence of streamers or brands but on the distributed orchestration of relations that transform volatility into a shared form of persistence. In this sense, relational equity bridge micro-level improvisation and macro-level stabilization: it is through the continuous realignment of actors' temporalities, local adjustments become systemic coherence (Blagoev and Schreyögg, 2019). The spiral dynamic (Figure 17) captures this recursive motion, where each moment of improvisation feeds into higher-order stabilization, and relational equity embodies this recursive motion sustaining the co-evolution of the ecosystem over time.

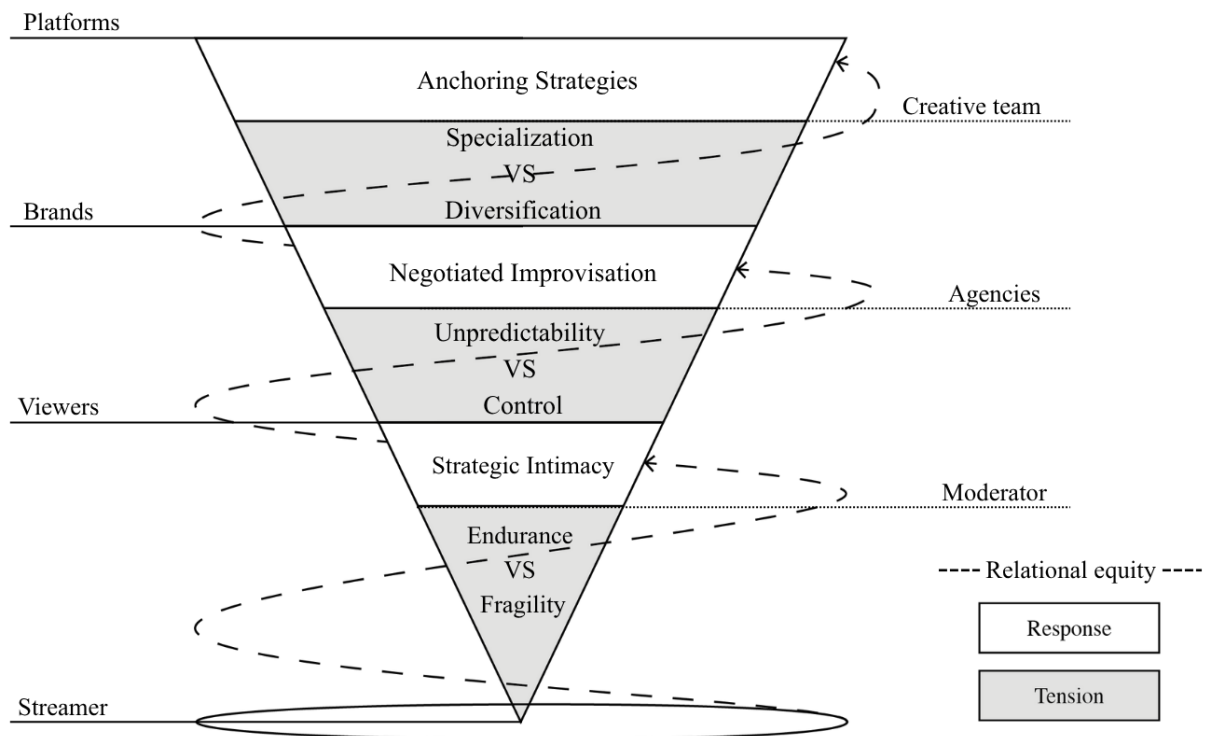


Figure 17 *The spiral model of value creation in the synchronous ecosystem*

4.5.2 Managerial implications

Our findings carry significant implications for brand managers, agencies, and platforms seeking to engage effectively with livestreaming environments. Value in synchronous ecosystems does not derive solely from visibility or reach but from the ability to stabilize volatile, real-time interactions through relational equity. Recognizing and operationalizing this form of value requires rethinking evaluative metrics, organizational roles, and partnership structures. This study reveals several managerial implications that highlight the opportunities and challenges of operating within synchronous business ecosystems.

A first implication is that traditional indicators such as impressions, follower counts, or average viewership fail to capture the relational effort required from actors to sustain continuous interactions. Consequently, we suggest that brands should integrate alternative measures, such as transparency resonance, meaning the degree of community forgiveness toward the streamer or trust, improvisational alignment, as the ability to prevent a crisis by running a longitudinal sentiment

analysis of the community, and anchoring spillover, meaning the overall engagement across platforms.

Moreover, given the fundamental role of moderators, agencies, and creative and business teams, who are not peripheral contributors but key stabilizers of relational equity, it becomes necessary to acknowledge them as strategic partners, formalizing their contribution within brand collaborations and campaign design. This includes supporting their activities in content repurposing, cross-platform integration, and community management, tasks that amplify the anchoring of live content and preserve long-term audience loyalty. Investing in these intermediaries strengthens not only the credibility of streamers but also the resilience of brand–ecosystem relationships.

Finally, to navigate synchronous ecosystems effectively, managers should evaluate transparency not merely as an engagement strategy but as a trust-building mechanism; incorporate improvisational risk metrics into campaign evaluations; and involve intermediaries directly in brand safety, content moderation, and performance assessments. By adopting these practices, brands and platforms can move from transactional collaborations to relation-based partnerships, encourages investment not only in streamers but also in the connective infrastructures (human, cultural, and organizational) that sustain continuity in high-pressure, real-time environments.

4.6 Conclusion

By theorizing the stabilizing role of intermediaries and the collective management of synchronicity, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how digital ecosystems maintain continuity under real-time pressure. Specifically, it identified three responses (strategic transparency, negotiated improvisation, and anchoring) that streamers adopt to manage the structural tensions arising from synchronous technologies. These strategies unfold within a spiral of tensions and rebalancing, highlighting the dynamic interplay between relationships, commercial agreements, and platform norms. Building on this view, we introduce relational equity as a form of value that underscores how ecosystem sustainability depends not only on streamers' performance, but it emerges on the effort of moderators, agencies, and creative and business teams who transform dyadic exchanges into enduring

relationships (Axelsson, 2024; Thach et al., 2024; Houssard et al., 2023). Then, by reframing value creation as an ongoing process of synchronization rather than a fixed outcome, this study extends the equity-based framework of Libai et al. (2025) and situates it within the broader context of digital temporality.

As with all qualitative research, this study is subject to limitations that inform directions for future work. First, our findings are based on an interpretive analysis of a multi-method qualitative dataset. While this approach provides cultural depth and contextual nuance, it also reflects the researchers' interpretive lens, and the meanings ascribed to livestreaming practices should be read as situated rather than definitive. Second, the sample is restricted to Italian Twitch users, including streamers, moderators, viewers, and agencies. Although this context offers a rich vantage point into synchronous ecosystems, it limits the generalizability of results to other cultural settings, platforms, or forms of livestreaming. Cross-country comparative studies would be particularly valuable in understanding how relational equity unfolds across diverse sociocultural contexts.

Future research could further develop these insights by examining how relational equity operates across different content ecosystems (e.g., gaming, education, health-related livestreams) and how it evolves under platform transformations, regulatory interventions, or shifting monetization models. Quantitative and longitudinal approaches would also enrich understanding of the durability and transferability of relational equity across platforms and cultural contexts, offering a stronger empirical basis for capturing its contribution to influencer marketing. Finally, additional work might investigate synchronous ecosystems beyond gaming, such as education, health, or political livestreams, to assess how relational equity sustains engagement in domains with different objectives and stakes.

Chapter 5

General Conclusion

This final chapter integrates the theoretical and empirical contributions of the dissertation, tracing how the shift from asynchronous to synchronous interaction reconfigures the foundations of marketing and value creation.

Across multiple levels of analysis, the study has demonstrated that synchrony does not merely denote simultaneity but rather involves an ongoing work of synchronization (Jordheim, 2014). This effort started from the streamer level, becoming a collective effort, through which other actors align their rhythms and expectations. Within the volatile environment of livestreaming, synchronization emerges as the mechanism that sustains coherence and generates relational equity: a durable form of value rooted in the continuous maintenance of connection and mutual responsiveness over time. The analysis further reveals that this process unfolds across distinct yet interdependent temporal layers: structured (*Chronos*), experiential (*Kairos*), and durational (*Aion*), which together shape the cumulative value of relationships. These temporal structures not only enable streamers to navigate live interactions but also allow the ecosystem itself to endure over time.

Building on these insights, the following sections synthesize the theoretical implications of this framework, discuss its managerial and societal relevance, and outline potential avenues for future research.

5.1 The Research Path: From synchronous instability to relational stability

This dissertation unfolded across two interconnected levels of analysis. At the community level, it examined streamers' practices of endurance improvisation as the ability to remain present, adaptive, and emotionally responsive in real-time. At the ecosystemic level, it analyzed the coordination of

broader ecosystems that link brands, platforms, audiences, and where intermediaries facilitate connections through shared temporal infrastructures. Across these analytical layers, a consistent pattern emerged: while synchrony intensifies instability (accelerating interaction, compressing attention, and exposing relationships to volatility) it also generates the need for stabilization. The work of synchronization answers this need. It refers to the continuous and distributed labor through which actors align their rhythms, recalibrate expectations, and sustain coherence across time.

This process, however, is rarely individual: it unfolds through intermediaries such as moderators, agencies, and creative and business teams, who mediate and sustain coordination across ecosystem layers. At the community level, moderators act as relational stabilizers, managing the flow of interaction and ensuring continuity when attention decreases. At the brand level, agencies institutionalize spontaneity, transforming the volatility of live performances into manageable partnerships and communicative reliability. Finally, at the ecosystem level, creative and production teams extend synchrony beyond the moment of interaction, repurposing live content and securing its circulation across platforms. By managing the fragile balance between spontaneity and structure, these intermediaries enable community synchronization to evolve into systemic stability. The resulting form of value, conceptualized as relational equity, captures the cumulative stability produced by communal work of synchronization (Jordheim, 2014). In this sense, synchronization represents both the symptom and the remedy of digital instability: it is the work that allows temporally fragile ecosystems to endure through collective coordination.

The next section develops this theoretical synthesis in depth, examining how synchronization operates across layered temporalities, Chronos, Kairos, and Aion, to transform synchrony into relational stability.

5.2 Theoretical Contribution: Temporal Stratification In Synchronous Ecosystem

In synchronous environments, stability is never given, it must be constantly achieved. Real-time communication brings actors together in the same temporal frame but also exposes them to volatility,

acceleration, and pressure. Hence, interactions that once unfolded sequentially now happen at once, forcing brands, creators, and audiences to act and react without delay. This immediacy intensifies fragility: decisions are made live, emotions are public, and coordination becomes precarious. Far from guaranteeing coherence, synchrony generates a continuous state of adjustment, where connection and disruption coexist. Understanding how such environments remain viable requires looking not at synchrony as a static property, but at the work of synchronization that sustains it.

Differently from synchrony, synchronicity designates a meaningful coincidence rather than a structural alignment. Introduced by Jung (1952; in Main, 2006) to describe acausal temporal correspondences, it has been reinterpreted in social sciences to denote the experiential and interpretive dimension of simultaneity: the moment when heterogeneous temporalities appear as coexisting and coherent (Jordheim, 2014). Synchrony thus refers to the structural possibility of simultaneity, while synchronicity refers to the social labor required to make that simultaneity meaningful, and in livestreaming becomes explicit and visible, shaping the infrastructure of everyday interaction. In particular, it denotes the ongoing effort through which heterogeneous actors (streamers, audiences, brands, moderators, and intermediaries) align their temporal rhythms, negotiate meaning, and maintain participation over time.

As Jordheim argues, modernity itself can be understood as an extended “work of synchronization,” through which plural and often conflicting temporalities (social, political, technological) are continuously adjusted to produce the illusion of a single time. This perspective resonates with Braudel’s (1958) notion of “*longue durée*”, which conceives of social life as composed of layered temporalities. Against the illusion of immediacy, Braudel described history as structured by the coexistence of fast, cyclical, and slow rhythms that interlock to produce continuity. Media studies further illuminate this coexistence. Scannell (1996), in his analysis of broadcasting, identified a tension between eventful time, marked by the immediacy of live transmission, and motionless time, the enduring flow of everyday life that gives such events their meaning. Together, these perspectives

highlight that no system operates within a single temporality: both individual endurance and ecosystem stability depends on the alignment of multiple times that are constantly negotiated.

This dissertation argue that this alignment can be interpreted through the Chronos-Kairos-Aion temporal framework. Chronos designates the measurable time of the system, hence schedules, algorithms, and routines that structure participation and make activity predictable. Kairos captures experiential time in which interaction becomes meaningful. Aion, finally, refers to the durational time of relationships as the continuity that extends beyond the moment, binding participants in a shared experience. The work of synchronization takes place within this dynamic tension: actors continually move between the discipline of Chronos and the vitality of Kairos, producing Aion as the emergent sense of duration that holds the ecosystem together.

Temporality	Type of time	Role within the ecosystem	Analytical level	Key terms
Chronos	Time of order (structure, coordination)	Operational condition of the system; defines the institutional and infrastructural rhythms that enable synchronization	Infrastructural / institutional	Algorithm, platform, scheduling, routine
Kairos	Time of experience (event, resonance)	Expressive condition of interaction; transforms coordination into connection and meaning	Performative / interactional	Moment, improvisation, connection, intensity
Aion	Time of duration (relation, continuity)	Relational condition of the ecosystem; allows coexistence and persistence of relationships over time	Ecosystemic / relational	Duration, co-evolution, bond, memory

Table 8 *Temporal stratification in synchronous ecosystems*

Through this lens, relational stability is not the absence of change but its coordination through time. The resulting equity captures the enduring value generated by this alignment: the social and affective capital accumulated through repeated coordination and mutual adjustment.

This redefinition of value aligns with the evolution of brand relationship theory (Fournier, 1998; Fournier & Avery, 2011), where relationships are no longer conceived as stable dyadic bonds but as

dynamic systems of co-creation. In this context, the boundaries between brand co-creation and brand relationship collapse: value is not derived from the relationship but *is* the relationship itself, as the outcome of learning to persist together and to perceived time as a shared resource.

5.3 Managerial Implications

Traditional marketing frameworks are structured around calendars, campaigns, and lifecycle models, presupposing a world governed by Chronos, where time is measurable, sequential, and controllable. Yet in environments shaped by simultaneity and unpredictability, such logics lose efficacy. As Hernes (2014) notes, organizations are temporal achievements rather than static entities: they exist by continuously reproducing order in time. The temporality of livestreaming, real-time advertising, and interactive communities demands that firms to no longer anticipate the future but to remain attuned to the present, adopting a Kairos perspective.

This reorientation implies that brands must act less as directors of campaigns and more as participants in ongoing exchanges. In this setting, trust and authenticity become temporal rather than static constructs. Trust manifests as temporal reliability, the predictable recurrence of a brand's presence and responsiveness over time (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Authenticity emerges not from transparency or message consistency but from the continuity of interaction as a reassurance that the brand will be there, responding and adjusting in rhythm with its publics (Morhart et al., 2015; Holt, 2002).

Intermediaries play a decisive role in supporting this balance. Moderators, agencies, and creative and business teams function as coordinators of the distinct rhythms of brands, platforms, and communities (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015). They absorb tensions and ensure that the system maintains coherence across moments of instability. Their work aligns with Gittell's (2006) concept of relational coordination, in which communication, shared goals, and mutual respect synchronize action across organizational boundaries. Often invisible, this coordination labor constitutes the connective glue that allows real-time collaboration to endure. Recognizing it as a strategic asset means expanding the

boundaries of brand management beyond the firm, acknowledging the distributed nature of relational equity (Axelsson, 2024).

This temporal logic also redefines the nature of marketing production itself. Within synchronous ecosystems, “done becomes better than perfect”: the value of communication lies not in its aesthetic refinement but in its capacity to happen in time (Abidin, 2020). The shift from edited to lived content marks a transition where the brand no longer speaks about its identity but performs it alongside consumers (Khamis et al., 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2012). In this sense, brands, influencers, and audiences operating synchronously, co-create meaning through shared presence rather than mediated distance, although in online context. This opens the path toward a broader reflection on how synchronization reshapes not only managerial practices but also the social and ethical conditions of digital life.

5.4 Societal Implications

The temporal transformations that define synchronous ecosystems extend beyond marketing practice, reshaping how individuals experience presence and intimacy. In digital life, time has become a relational currency. What users exchange is not merely data or content but presence itself as a willingness to appear and remain available anytime. As Rosa (2013) observes, contemporary societies are governed by acceleration, where the compression of time becomes both a driver of efficiency and a source of existential pressure. Within this condition, synchrony functions as a basis of sociality: relationships are sustained not by spatial proximity but by the capacity to remain together in time.

Yet this same condition of simultaneity imposes new costs. The demand for continuous presence transforms time into labor, embedding the logic of endurance within everyday life. Gregg (2013) describes this phenomenon as work’s intimacy: the blurring of personal and professional boundaries through digital connectivity. Livestreaming, influencer culture, and real-time interaction exemplify this logic. The need to “be there” becomes an ordinary expectation, fostering a culture of endurance where visibility is rewarded and absence punished. Crary (2013) frames this as the “24/7” condition of late capitalism, where the boundaries between work and rest dissolve into a permanent state of

activity. In synchronous ecosystems, this dynamic is particularly acute: while synchrony fosters connection and empathy, it also intensifies fatigue, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, revealing a contradiction of being together in real time.

Ultimately, these reflections invite a detachment from a temporal economy that treats temporal resources as consumable and productive, toward a more balanced rhythms of life. Hartog's (2003) concept of presentism, the dominance of an ever-accelerating present, helps explain the cultural implications that follows from constant synchronization. Reintroducing temporal diversity, recognizing the legitimacy of slowdown, and embrace discontinuity become forms of cultural resilience. If synchronization has become the defining condition of digital culture, learning to preserve temporal difference and may be its most urgent social challenge.

5.5 Bridging Research and Practice

The collaboration with AK Informatica offered a unique opportunity to observe synchronization as both an analytical framework and an organizational practice. As an industrial PhD partner, AK acted as a living laboratory in which academic and managerial perspectives unfolded in parallel. This collaboration was itself a process of synchronization: a negotiation of time, attention, and meaning between the different temporalities of academia and industry. Through its integrated structure, from hardware production, event organization, consulting to community management, AK exemplifies an ecosystemic actor that connects multiple layers of the eSport industry. Its capacity to coordinate the temporalities of brands, players, audiences, and institutional partners made it an ideal site to study synchronization in action. From this angle, AK's work can be understood as an exercise in organizational synchronization where each event requires the coordination of multiple temporalities such as technical schedules, brand commitments, player routines, and audience engagement windows. Yet, AK mediates between these rhythms to maintain continuity and momentum across the ecosystem. Within this setting, the concept of endurance improvisation, observed among streamers (Chapter 4) found a broader organizational manifestation. Endurance, in this context, describes not only individual persistence enacted by streamers, but enlighten the parallelism between eSport and Sport.,

This perspective reframes endurance as a shared temporal discipline that underlies both traditional athletic performance and digital competition. Just as athletes train their bodies to maintain rhythm, focus, and consistency, eSport professional players must cultivate temporal resilience to manage the unpredictability of live performance and audience expectation.

The collaboration also demonstrated how research and industry can co-produce knowledge. By engaging directly with AK's practices, the dissertation contributed conceptual tools (such as relational equity and synchronization) that helped articulate the invisible labor sustaining eSport ecosystems. Conversely, the company's reflexive engagement with these concepts enriched the academic understanding of how synchrony operates in organizational contexts. This exchange embodies the logic of relational co-creation that underpins the entire dissertation: theory and practice evolve through mutual adjustment. On a broader cultural level, the partnership contributed to the legitimation of eSport as a contemporary form of sport and social participation. By framing endurance as a temporal and relational capacity, this collaboration contributes to the broader recognition of eSport as a legitimate field of practice that, like traditional sports, demands not only skill and performance but the ability to endure together in time.

5.6 Concluding Remarks

This dissertation has traced how synchrony reshapes way in which people connect each other in digital and fast-pacing context. Across such ecosystems, brands, communities, and platforms no longer coexist in static structures but in temporal alignment that must be continuously achieve to endure. In recognizing synchronization as both labor and relation, this work invites scholars and practitioners alike to look beyond visibility and engagement, toward the deeper and quieter work of synchronization that allows systems, relationships, and societies to keep time together.

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