

# Freedom and giving in game streams: A Foucauldian exploration of tips and donations on Twitch

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## Abstract

Twitch is a full-fledged marketplace for game consumption, where gameplay is live streamed by players for the benefit of viewers/followers. Using Foucault's notions of freedom as a practice, we provide a psychosocial understanding of game stream engagement, and especially, user motivations for tipping streamers or donating to charity (i.e., "giving"). Following a netnographic approach, we analyse contributions to a large online forum and data gathered from 15 focus groups. We find that giving arises as an outcome of users exercising their freedom, whilst negotiating personal difficulties, for social gratification (e.g., status among peers), self-determination (i.e., feeling control over one's life), and self-extension (i.e., feeling affinity with others to achieve ideal self). By providing opportunities for self-extension and self-determination, which lead to better connectivity and stronger community support compared to social media, Twitch enables users to "give freely" (i.e., without obligation or compunction). Consequently, Twitch offers scope for more effective and mutually beneficial means of fundraising than traditional nonprofit marketing strategies, particularly by reaching younger target groups. Ultimately, the paper integrates three widely used theories under one (Foucauldian) metatheoretical perspective and highlights the central role of freedom in understanding game stream user engagement. Practical implications for nonprofit fundraising are also considered.

## KEYWORDS

charity stream, digital marketplace, donation, Foucault, game streaming, self-determination theory (SDT), Twitch, uses and gratification

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Understanding the dynamics among users and structures within fast-growing digital marketplaces is vital for the advancement of modern marketing practice and theory (Wang & Chou, 2019). Game streaming (or game casting) is the live telecasting of video game play on the internet. With more than two million broadcasters and millions of viewers at any given time, Twitch is the most popular game

streaming platform (Jia et al., 2016). Remarkably, over \$80 million have been raised for charitable causes through Twitch in 2020 alone, arguably the hardest year for fundraising due to COVID-19's impact, whereas traditional approaches have struggled in the best of times (Forbes, 2020). Yet, this phenomenon has not been sufficiently understood in marketing research. Previous studies from other disciplines suggest that users donate in return for social interactions and a sense of community (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018).

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These explanations, however, seem inadequate given that other avenues such as social media and multiplayer gaming can also provide social and entertainment value, but fail to match Twitch's success in charitable fundraising, especially with younger audiences. Moreover, a key feature of platforms such as Twitch, is the freedom they offer users to broadcast opinions, exchange information, and express themselves through creativity (The Verge, 2019). In spite of this, the role of freedom in understanding user behavior and motivations in game streams has been rather under-appreciated in extant research.

In this paper, we offer an empirically supported metatheoretical perspective to highlight the importance of freedom in understanding user behavior on Twitch. By drawing upon Foucault's view of freedom as a negotiation and possibility of action, we explain how tipping and donation behavior can be understood as a manifestation of users exercising their freedom as a practice. Tipping, in this context, refers to viewers giving money to streamers for personal use, whereas donations are for charitable causes; we refer to these collectively as "giving."

Nonprofit fundraising in the online world has been gaining attention in recent years (Wallace et al., 2017). Reduced psychological distance, identity-based connections, and the ability to choose who benefits are factors that induce positive responses from donors in relation to nonprofit fundraising (Jansen et al., 2011; Small & Loewenstein, 2003). Twitch represents an interesting prospect for nonprofit marketing because all these conditions have been observed in game stream environments (Hu et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2012). However, relationships within gaming platforms can be asymmetric, that is, not always mutually beneficial for all parties involved. Forms of social dominance, discrimination, and oppression are manifest in gaming environments, and user engagement within them can be symptomatic of underlying psychological problems (Dy et al., 2017; Laconi et al., 2017; Todd & Melancon, 2017). This poses a threat for nonprofit marketing strategies, which ought to be free from stigmatization and discrimination of individuals, and encourage participation and diversity instead (Szablewska & Kubacki, 2017). Despite this, Twitch has emerged to be a highly fertile ground for fundraising for charitable causes (Conditt, 2016), especially at a time when traditional fundraising efforts have encountered various socio-political hurdles and struggled to gain traction with younger generations (Institute for Fundraising, 2017a, 2017b). Therefore, when attempting to better understand this phenomenon, applying Foucault's lens of freedom can be more effective in contrast to existing research, as it focuses on the deeper cause (exercising freedom) rather than individual behavioral manifestations (e.g., engagement, donations). As such, the Foucauldian framework of freedom can also help integrate different theoretical perspectives that have been used in existing research to explain various facets of user behavior on Twitch.

Hence, the contributions of this paper are as follows: (1) Highlights the central role of freedom (as a practice) in explaining users' engagement in game stream consumption; (2) Provides a psychosocial explanation for how giving evolves on Twitch as an outcome of users practising freedom in the Foucauldian sense; (3) Consolidates disparate theoretical viewpoints on game stream user behavior under one (Foucauldian) metatheoretical conceptualization; and (4) Ultimately, considers implications for nonprofit marketing on Twitch.

## 2 | GAME STREAMS FROM A FOUCAULDIAN VIEWPOINT

As discussed in the introduction, the Foucauldian view of freedom is a more suitable theoretical lens for understanding giving on Twitch in comparison to theories used in the existing literature. Rather than conceptualizing freedom in the modern sense of individual autonomy, which is an independent ideal, Foucault sees freedom as a critical, creative, and ongoing practice that is always dependent on power and dominance (Dey & Steyaert, 2016; Oksala, 2005). In this view, it is in the struggle or resistance with power structures that freedom materializes in practice (Viriasova, 2006).

Drawing on Foucault's views on control and freedom, critical marketing theorists have argued that technological advances in the marketplace, though touted as means of mass emancipation, are evolved forms of a Panopticon (Buchanan-Oliver et al., 2010; Humphreys, 2006; Mick & Fournier, 1998). A Panopticon is an all-seeing control system or prison, which was originally conceived by Jeremy Bentham (Crampton & Elden, 2016). Marketplace relationships between brands/organizations and users/consumers are not necessarily rational, reciprocal, or beneficial, and may leave users/consumers open to exploitation by corporations and peers (Molesworth et al., 2018). Technological marketplaces (e.g., gaming platforms) may exacerbate this situation, for example, through constant tracking and intrusive targeting of users/consumers (O'Malley et al., 2008). In such contexts, the Foucauldian lens has proven useful for critical examination and understanding of the relationship dynamics between marketplace actors (Johnson et al., 2017).

There is much social stigma and stereotyping surrounding the online gaming involvement of individuals, who are often regarded by society and represented by media as socially incompetent and outcast (Kowert et al., 2012). Further, online gaming engagement has been seen as a symptom of underlying psychological conditions relating to depression or social anxiety, especially in men (Laconi et al., 2017). Closer examination of gaming platforms points to various forms of power and dominance that result in asymmetric relationships between marketplace actors (Teichert et al., 2017), which places much significance on understanding their practice of freedom in the Foucauldian sense (Shankar et al., 2006). Though some aspects of individual identity are shielded by the anonymity afforded by the virtual world, sexism and racism are a manifest, and ultimately normalized, feature of power and dominance in online gaming marketplaces (Todd & Melancon, 2017). Female gamers feel considerable stigma, and subsequently avoid identifying themselves as gamers due to discrimination (Vermeulen et al., 2017).

Even so, collaborative gaming has been strongly linked to the development of individual and social competencies that can have beneficial consequences in the real world (McGonigal, 2011). Notably, research illustrates how game streaming on Twitch positively contributes to personal and professional wellbeing of individuals with disabilities and psychological problems by drawing support from the diverse and inclusive communities within Twitch and allowing streamers the freedom to develop their own creative identity (Johnson, 2019). As discussed earlier, Foucauldian freedom is not found in the absence of power and dominance, but in the act of contending with these. Hence, Twitch can be

seen as a form of marketplace where stereotypes and stigma are torn down in the formation of community and connectivity that go beyond geo-political boundaries, especially for individuals who face personal and professional difficulties in ordinary life.

### 3 | A META-THEORETICAL INTEGRATION OF THEORIES USED IN PRIOR RESEARCH

In this section, we examine three theoretical bases that have been used in extant literature (i.e., Uses and Gratifications Theory [UGT], Self-determination Theory [SDT], and Self-extension Theory), which offer some explanations of user behavior in game streams, and integrate these under the overarching theme of Foucauldian freedom (discussed in preceding sections). As a result, we provide an underlying explanation for game stream user engagement and giving.

#### 3.1 | UGT and Foucauldian freedom

UGT is the predominant theoretical lens in communication studies, and subsequently, gaming and digital media-related research (e.g., Nanda & Banerjee, 2020). It holds that individuals' (repeated) choice of media is deliberate and focused on satisfying five types of psychological needs: cognitive (i.e., information and knowledge gain), affective (i.e., pleasure and emotional gain), tension-release (i.e., diversion and escapism), personal integrative (i.e., affirm status, or gain credibility), and social integrative (i.e., develop and maintain relationships) (Chen, 2011).

UGT has been applied to game streaming research, showing that game stream viewers have stronger social and community-related motivational bases (e.g., compared to mass media) (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). Further, online gaming platforms such as Twitch serve an important role in supporting attachment-avoidant individuals by creating an environment conducive to a sense of closeness, belonging, and security (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015). Attachment-avoidant individuals are those who avoid forming emotional attachments because they see others as undependable, which results in their social isolation (Buote et al., 2009). Similarly, individuals with disabilities are also able to find community support in game streams (Johnson, 2019). Hence, game streaming environments may provide the opportunity to satisfy the five forms of psychological needs (identified under UGT) to individuals who are incapable of achieving this in ordinary life, due to being socially deprived, or physical and emotional inhibitions. In so doing, they are practising freedom from a Foucauldian perspective of contending with social norms that dominate and exert power over them (Pezdek & Rasiński, 2017); the satisfaction of psychological needs may therefore be seen as an outcome of practising freedom.

#### 3.2 | SDT and Foucauldian freedom

SDT is an often-used foundation in social sciences that examines human behavior as a means by which to satisfy innate

psychological needs; namely, *autonomy* (perceived freedom to act), *competence* (capability to perform such acts), and *relatedness* (feeling connected to others) (Martin & Hill, 2012; Özbek et al., 2016). SDT overlaps with aspects of UGT in that they are both concerned with fulfillment of psychological needs. However, SDT takes the view that individuals seek to feel in control over their situations, experiences, and choices; and has roots in research focusing on intrinsic (natural or inherent drive for behavior), and extrinsic (behavior contingent on external rewards or threats) human motivations (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Previous studies in consumer behavior (Martin & Hill, 2012; Shankar et al., 2006) and digital marketing (Wheaton et al., 2016) have argued that individuals' autonomy and motivations are in continual interplay with what Foucault considers as "normalising market forces" (e.g., products/brands on offer in the market), and it is in this interplay that meaningful consumption experiences are created. As such, SDT and Foucauldian freedom are closely linked in that practices of freedom are in essence, self-determined actions (i.e., made freely based on intrinsic motivations). Research into game streams that focuses on game players (as opposed to viewers) offers further support for this argument (Zhao et al., 2018). Extant research on game streams also provides accounts of individual and collective acts of self-determination (i.e., developing a sense of control over one's life or situation), such as community identity development, creative expressions, and collective knowledge generation (Sjöblom et al., 2017), which are practices of freedom from a Foucauldian perspective.

#### 3.3 | Self-extension theory and Foucauldian freedom

Self-extension in the game streaming context can be thought of as feeling close affinity with a community that brings one close to one's ideal self (Belk, 2014). Playing games has been found to be a way of extending one's real self to be closer to an ideal self (i.e., all one can be) through game characters or avatars, and by enacting fantasies in a process of transformative play (Belk & Costa, 1998; Molesworth & Denegri-Knott, 2007; Przybylski et al., 2011). Reality is often mundane and unsatisfactory, not least because of the pressure to conform to society norms; games offer means by which to free oneself from this reality (McGonigal, 2011) and in the process, one practices Foucauldian freedom.

More profound explanations for self-extension in game streams can be posited based on research into human-computer interactions, showing that self-extension is a result of immersive community-based experiences that come from coinhabiting an environment which is neither home nor workplace (also known as "third places") and creating or sharing such experiences with others in the community (i.e., coexperiencing) (Belk, 2013).

Coexperience is a significant feature of user psychology in video stream environments (compared to social media). It comprises the feeling that one's own experience is part of a community's experience (i.e., participation), that knowledge is shared between

individuals, and that reciprocal influence of each other's experience leads to agreement and assimilation (Lim et al., 2012). Human-computer interaction studies have shed light on how we appropriate and make meaning out of an environment or space through psycho-spatial interactions, which gives us a sense of being embedded within it (Dourish, 2004; Hornecker, 2016).

Using advanced multifaceted communication systems that may both mimic and exceed real-world scenarios in terms of engagement and impact, individuals may inhabit a game streaming environment not just by movement but also through language and other signals (Recktenwald, 2017). Such sense of inhabiting a space that is meaningful and having the ability or tools to manipulate movement and interaction within it (perceiving corresponding responses from it), produces a state of immersive coexperience in game stream environments by reducing the psychological distance between individuals who are geographically distant (Lim et al., 2012), leading to increased identification between individuals and groups (Hu et al., 2017).

Hence, through cohabiting and coexperiencing as well as transformative fantasy play, users are able to extend their self (which may be unsatisfactory owing to real-world mundanity and inhibitions, such as disability) to one that is more ideal and closely connected to a community. Thus, users' escape from reality becomes a Foucauldian act of freedom through resistance and creativity (i.e., not settling for consuming what is on offer, rather cocreating what one wants to consume) (Skandalis et al., 2016).

## 4 | METHODOLOGY

We adopted a Netnographic approach by combining focus-groups in conjunction with nonparticipant observation and analysis of textual data from an online forum (Cova & Pace, 2006). Using Kozinets' (2010) framework, our research strategy can be detailed as follows.

### 4.1 | Entrée

We identified the specific community of interest in line with the purpose of this study (discussed in the Introduction section)—Twitch users (both streamers and viewers); in the online context, we focus on the online forum Reddit, which has a dedicated subforum (subreddit) for Twitch which currently has more than 600 K registered members.

### 4.2 | Data collection

To uncover general aspects of Twitch-related experiences and giving, we conducted 15 focus group interviews with voluntary participants (45% female; aged 19–30) who have all had some involvement with Twitch. The participants were recruited through an email advert in two UK universities, and the number and size of focus groups were decided based on the availability and the suitability of participants who had prior experience of the context. Each focus group lasted an average of around

35 min; given that participants were not compensated for their time, longer in-depth conversations were not feasible, so we opted for a relatively high number of focus groups instead. In the online context, we conducted an initial search of the/r/Twitch subreddit using key words and related words (donations, freedom, anxiety, depression, disability, charity, support, etc.). The searches were then iteratively refined to identify relevant threads, which resulted in 52 threads. Each thread contained several comments and followed a pattern common in online forums: the starting comments often long and detailed, followed by short response comments.

### 4.3 | Data analysis and coding

The online forum comments were downloaded in PDF format, one document for each thread. These and the focus group data were content-analysed following a thematisation or categorization process (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which has been applied in comparable contexts (Coupland, 2005), by manually color-coding units of analysis (specific sentences) according to themes that were closely linked to those discussed in the literature sections of this paper and also the keywords used in the search of the online forum. Initially, two of the authors independently thematised the data and then compared for overlaps and discrepancies (Saldaña, 2016). The resulting meta- and sub-codes (in parentheses) are as follows: *uses and gratifications* (entertainment/satisfaction, support for disability/anxiety, relationships, relief from pressures, information/knowledge, status); *self-determination* (autonomy/having control, competence/skill, intrinsic motivations, trust, and community); *self-extension* (being/finding oneself, fantasy, coinhabiting space, coexperience); *practice of freedom* (creative action, breaking barriers, escaping normalization and resistance, Panopticon, sexism/racism, or discrimination); *giving* (donating/tipping process, charity, motivation, receiving donation, or income).

### 4.4 | Ensuring ethical standards

The focus groups were voluntary and there were no minors or vulnerable adults among the participants. The online forum comments are publicly available and accessible without special permission or membership, which allowed authors to adopt a nonparticipatory observational role and preserve the “rawness” of the data. However, specific screen names of contributors to the forum are completely anonymised when reporting their comments in line with recommended good-practice (Steinmetz, 2012).

### 4.5 | Representation and interpretation

In reporting the results, we follow a reflexive approach of recurring comparisons and contrasts between the data units (e.g., comments) and extant theory (Gopaldas, 2016), making incremental additions or revisions where relevant. Quotes were checked for internal

consistency and also for their quality in bringing user experience of the Twitch environment to life. The overarching emphasis in interpreting the quotes was on developing a novel underlying explanation for aspects of user behavior that have been discussed earlier in this paper.

## 5 | RESULTS AND FINDINGS

In this section, we present our results in the form of quotes taken from focus groups (denoted by "FG") or online forum (denoted by "ON") data. The presentation of results is organized by major thematic categories that are closely linked to the earlier discussions on extant literature.

### 5.1 | Uses and gratifications and links to freedom

Uses and gratifications covered some of the most basic reasons why users engaged with Twitch; namely, for the entertainment and satisfaction derived from watching game streams of their choice, for status, relief, support and to learn something (e.g., how to be good at a game). Users, particularly streamers, mention relief (from stress or tension) as a reason for coming to Twitch.

*Streaming takes my mind off other things. Id [sic] always stay late in the office, for no extra benefit. Now im [sic] able to do this as a hobby for fun, and something I can own. So it gives me a feeling of accomplishment and good community when your [sic] interacting with others (ON).*

Beyond simple satisfaction, entertainment value, or stress relief, users also find support, which they lack elsewhere, and this also contributes to the development of their self-status. For streamers, the knowledge that they are entertaining others whilst doing something they like contributes to their status development.

*It [streaming] excites me so much that I can just chill and entertain people (ON).*

*It does a lot of good to yourself to know that people turn up watch you, talk to you, and be there with you (FG).*

The relationship users forge whilst participating in Twitch is a major contributing factor to the support and status (among other features) that users derive from the Twitch community.

*[on Twitch] I've made friends with people who I've shared joy, frustration, sadness, madness with, and I wouldn't trade it for anything else (ON).*

*They were a positive group of like-minded individuals who were happy sitting and chatting over a website that had*

*little real impact on our lives. Essentially, it was a place to be and be comfortable with myself. Eventually I fell in friendships with several people... (ON).*

However, we find that freedom is an underlying theme to the uses and gratifications that the users derived from participating on Twitch. This is a recurring theme, which we explore further in ensuing discussions. In the Foucauldian sense, users are not simply being granted freedom; they struggle with various aspects and *find* freedom in the process.

*The basic reason for coming to Twitch?...It's the freedom... you choose what you want, and whom to engage with and how to communicate (FG).*

Particularly, where social anxiety and various similar conditions were being experienced by users, they struggle to find community support elsewhere, but come to Twitch and discover the support they need.

*I'm an introvert who has social anxiety. Twitch has been a home for me for the last two years. Met some excellent people and it helped boost my confidence and self-esteem immensely (ON).*

*Nothing comes easy. At first, it was hard [Twitch] but you get there in the end. If you are trying, you can definitely find a place there that you're happy with, because nobody can stop you but you (FG).*

So, whilst need satisfaction is a basic requirement, there is no linear *quid pro quo* relationship between the streamers and the viewers. The dynamics of the relationships are more complex than that, which behooves further exploration, beyond UGT.

### 5.2 | Self-determination and freedom

Under self-determination we found themes around community and trust, and competence/skills that overlap with some aspects discussed earlier under uses and gratifications, which we revisit here and further develop.

In addition to the actual activity of gameplay, results show that involvement with game streams, in general, can also be beneficial from a community support point of view.

*When my viewers are upset I let them know I'm here for them and that our community is on their side. Additionally, I have people who say they have bad weeks and look forward to my stream to cheer them up. I feel obligated to show them a good time and have fun! so... thanks twitch I guess? (ON).*



Users formed relationships with others and found trust developing within them.

*(...) I have Asperger's (high functioning autism), extreme anxiety, and depression for days. Starting out in this journey, I didn't know what Twitch even was a year ago. I met someone who I fell in love with and is a partnered streamer. I watched him play for hours and hours and continued asking questions (ON).*

*I feel like having these conversations with people [about personal issues] on gaming because the trust seems to be there (FG).*

Furthermore, as before, we discovered underlying themes of Foucauldian freedom when analysing the data under the category of self-determination; examples include cases where users have struggled against personal inhibitions and are in the process of overcoming them (thus practising freedom) with the support of the Twitch community.

*There was a stream team that I joined in the past weeks. I can say that they have been such a strong force in my life and they're part of why I've been able to climb out. They've encouraged me to live on, fight, and reminded me why I chased my dreams (ON).*

In contending with hardship, users drew not only from the support of the community but also its knowledge and competence.

*As the nervous nelly I am, I didn't want to be on camera, I didn't want my photo shown, and I didn't want personal information about me on the internet at all. I was literally terrified as I was rather sheltered growing up. (...) ...He [favourite streamer] encouraged me often to stream, and I really didn't want to yet. But I did. No cam, just a mic, and people who I had met from his stream came to cheer me on and give me advice. (...) I finally found out what a community is. And it's my own (ON).*

There were also overlaps here with themes covered before under uses and gratifications. The gratifications, status, relief, and knowledge results from the community's support and relationships that users form within this community.

*[through a favourite streamer] I found a way to connect, I use a face cam, I smile all day, I'm excited to talk to people, excited to talk to more people. (...) Through this incredible gaming community, this girl found a way to smile all day through all the hardships of daily life (ON).*

We also found themes around autonomy/control and motivations (intrinsic/extrinsic) within the broader category of self-determination.

*Maybe there are people who stream for the money, but few do it like that. Most streamers are there because they are self-motivated, and nobody is forcing them to be there. They are having fun and we are having fun [as viewers]. I guess it's like we're in charge of what we do, so we do what we want (FG).*

Notably, the extrinsic and intrinsic motivation factors are somewhat unique to Twitch (from the users' perspective), especially compared to social media:

*social media is the best version of yourself, and gaming [on Twitch] is the real version of yourself, it's just that people don't see it, but I'm much more open about things on gaming than I am on social media (FG).*

### 5.3 | Self-extension and freedom

We find that Twitch users are able to become something close to their ideal self by engaging within the Twitch environment:

*[speaks about his experience on Twitch]...gaming allows me to be myself, whilst being faceless (FG).*

*Don't look at the viewer count [when streaming] or put some paper over it. Talk about what you like. Play what you like, react how you like (ON).*

There is a sense that users are in a safe space together, they coinhabit that space through some themes that have already been discussed (e.g., relationships community) or even via a sense of fantasy that is unique to Twitch users.

*it's kinda my go to place. I feel good there and if I don't like something, I can go watch another stream or just chat with people I know [to be regulars]; those guys are there (FG).*

*...whenever I try to explain Twitch to my loved ones, attempting to grasp it and unable to really feel the allure to something I like so passionately about, and I don't understand how you could not. How can you not feel the personal connection? How can you not enjoy immersing yourself in a world of fiction (much like literature)? How do you not see? (ON).*

*I am also one of many who suffer from some sort of social phobia, Anxiety as well as depression. I am certain a lot of people struggle with the issues I have struggled with and a lot of those people also have also found a home in twitch (ON).*

Individuals also feel a sense of experiencing the moment or the environment (space) together (i.e., coexperiencing).

*Some of the moments online are as rich and as funny as if we are actually together...to me [being on Twitch] it's just accessibility to the moment with people" (FG).*

*I am not afraid of talking about these [personal problems] issues and I am not afraid to share my experiences with others who have faced or are currently facing these issues and I encourage for any of you to do the same (ON).*

In addition, coexperience and coinhabitancy consist of a clear community-support element:

*I think that a lot of viewers could be interested in a channel that would not only be a neat place to interact with other viewers and the broadcaster, but also be a source of encouragement. A place where viewers and I could share their stories and support each other (ON).*

The Twitch environment offers the freedom for self-extension through many forms of relationships, including asymmetric ones, where the boundaries of what is considered a "normal" relationship are constantly contested and redefined by streamers and viewers.

*I know there are streamers I watch that are suffering through all kinds of mental health issues. I try to keep an eye on them offer them encouragement when I can and be a friend. I have tried to help with basic encouragement others in chat that are going through stuff, but it needs to be fairly basic advice. We aren't trained to deal with mental health issues, but we can encourage others to seek help, which is one of the hardest steps to take, and let them know they aren't alone in what they are dealing with (ON).*

*There are some issues, as racism and sexism, but to bag this up you can choose what you do (FG).*

There are also counter points of view concerning discrimination. As a practice of freedom, in the midst of all the accepted norms, people with all kinds of needs find support and forge relationships, leading to a diverse and inclusive environment.

*[referring to stereotypes about gamers] meeting people online does not fit this stigma of social outcast or any of that stuff...it's so many people you are meeting, who make a difference in this world really (FG).*

*...ideology is another one...can be knocked down by exploring them, and this [Twitch] is the outlet to explore them. It allowed me to be a bit more open-minded, because I'm talking to people from everywhere (FG).*

In this process of practising freedom, diversity on Twitch helps breach forms of power and dominance, and the extension of self, not

just across geographical boundaries, but via constructed personas (i.e., avatars) and creative expression is a key feature in this:

*(...). They start opening up and then you start opening up and you become close and you realize you're having a friend in Arizona?...I use my persona to highlight my positives, and when that relationship is strong enough, I go into things that I might be struggling with or difficulties in life... (FG).*

*Through the Twitch window I can become something more. If I'm playing something, I'm really good at, I'm creating stuff and that's cool. I guess the guys who are watching also feel cool (FG).*

In sum, individuals are free to extend their self to become something like their ideal self, despite barriers to that freedom both in the outside world and inside the Twitch community itself.

*Just BE and do what you enjoy and if somebody happens to click on your stream, that's a person to have a conversation with. You're not acting, you're enjoying. ...Don't let it bother you if no ones [sic] watching. You're playing the game because you want to, and why not stream it and have the opportunity to meet some people? (ON).*

## 5.4 | Giving and freedom

At a basic level, donations are motivated by uses and gratifications; for example, donating to a streamer they like so that he/she may continue or for the immediate gratification of player reactions or the donor's screen name popping up for everyone to see.

*With their donations most people want to support stream itself (...), they want to motivate the streamer to stay online, (...) (ON).*

*Donators donate because they want to see their name on the chat (FG).*

*For donations, it is important to have the optimum setting. You have to respond on [sic] donations and the chat because viewers want attention (ON).*

Such donations seem to stem from an extrinsically motivated form of self-determination, which is dependent on external rewards or reinforcement. Viewers donated to get something in return, whereby game streams are the new form of entertainment, replacing traditional television and cinema for example.

*Some donators want something in return for their donations. This can be something like entertainment or some*

streamers create some stuff, which they send to the donors for a certain amount of donation (ON).

*I watch them two to three times a week, it's almost like going to the cinema. I have donated money to the streamers (...) you pay them because they teach you stuff (FG).*

There are also more intrinsically motivated donations that are based on aspects of uses and gratifications and self-determination such as relationships, support, and community identity.

*Donations are for physical and mental support (FG).*

*Many of my regulars gave just because they cared about me (ON).*

*I personally consider a lot of streamers close friends and I understand the hardships of streaming, so it feels great to help out a friend who has the same goals as me (ON).*

Such motivations for donations seem strong in that even when donating for charitable causes (e.g., in charity streams), viewers prefer to donate through the streamer.

*Some people want to donate for charity, they want to do something good for other people. They prefer to donate to the streamer instead of the charity itself because they know them (FG).*

*If you show a direct impact of their donations, there will be more trust towards the organization and they will be more willing to donate (ON).*

However, the key underlying motivational impetus for giving emerges to be freedom, one that is not a given but earned.

*Donating is a free will action, you cannot force people to donate more often or even a higher amount to yourself; you should always be grateful for all kinds of donations, the amount doesn't matter (ON).*

*I think people donate purely because you have that freedom of choice; so basically, all your decision making to end up on that stream. You can choose the content, you speak to me, you speak to my audience, you engage however long or short you want and then you go (FG).*

A pivotal influence behind this is the freedom to engage in Twitch without the compulsion to donate, in which context the donations occur naturally:

*They pay to go to the cinema; the only difference is that they have the freedom to consume before they're giving*

*and I feel that this helps people....it's consume and then the investment afterwards, that's the difference (...) so you save time, you don't have to make research before making your decision what to watch (FG).*

Diversity of inclusion in the Twitch community is also an aspect of such freedom; it emerges in the process of breaking down boundaries.

*[in the context of donations...] there is organically diversity there [on Twitch], it is bringing people together, lifting geographic, political, social, economic boundaries; I mean the real world is full of boundaries (FG).*

Though results show that giving emerges in this context, as an outcome of a combination of uses and gratifications, self-determination, and self-extension, we observe a complex interplay of these themes with that of Foucauldian freedom.

*I volunteer some time at a children's hospital working with the children who have terminal illnesses. The children like watching streamers play games on Twitch on the iPads I provided the way since they themselves can't play the games (usually due to seizures). Whenever one of them passes away, I note their favourite streamer, and usually wait a few months before making myself known and "rewarding" (for lack of a better word) the streamer for entertaining a kid before they died.....I've only really told maybe two of the recipients. Usually I'll just drop it anonymously, or if I'm feeling chatty, communicate through messaging or whatnot with them for a few days (to satiate their interest) then just randomly disappear (ON).*

## 5.5 | Practical aspects of charitable fundraising

Many streamers express the willingness to raise funds for charity, but there are certain practical elements that are conducive to viewers' intrinsic motivations. For example, the commitment and determination of the streamer can be signaled by the length of the stream, and their authenticity by their attitude. In contrast, providing no information about themselves and only advertising the fundraising part, tends to have a negative effect on viewers.

*24 hour streams are more appealing to people because it is a tough goal to reach and exemplifies the importance of the event and your dedication to the charity (ON).*

*People are more inclined to donate if you are having fun AND helping a good cause (ON).*

*If I click on a channel and see what they are about and I see only a donate button in the panels. I will click off your stream right away (ON).*



Having a target sum and displaying progress towards it, as well as following a schedule, are also advisable.

*...you will need a goal and some type of progress bar to show how close you are to your goal on stream. Make this goal realistic...Having a schedule will keep you sane and keep the stream moving... (ON).*

## 6 | SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS

### 6.1 | Overall contributions to theory

Based on the theoretical arguments made earlier and the analysis of the data, we synthesize findings into a Foucauldian meta-theoretical perspective. Figure 1 presents our conceptual synthesis, which we expand upon later in Sections 6.2 and 6.3. Further, major theoretical gaps and our contribution in relation to them can be summarized as follows:

- Existing research points to need satisfaction or gratification, social connections, status-seeking, and fantasy/escapism as motivators for giving. Yet, these features can also be observed on regular social media and other types of gaming environments (e.g., MMORPG). So, they do not adequately explain how giving evolves on Twitch, especially in light of Twitch's remarkable success in nonprofit fundraising. Using the Foucauldian lens, we show that gaining gratifications and forming relationships, as well as

coinhabitancy and coexperience, are ways of practising freedom on Twitch. Thus, the "giving" that results from these, are intrinsically motivated, which is why fundraising on Twitch is more effective and consistent.

- Previous research has used three different theoretical perspectives to explain observable user behavior on Twitch. However, as discussed above, these do not provide a sufficient account of how giving evolves on the platform. We have argued that this is because previous theories (UGT, SDT, etc.) may not be completely suited to examining asymmetric relationships, such as those found on Twitch and discussed in our findings. By applying the theoretical lens of Foucault's ideas on freedom, this paper integrates the different theoretical perspectives used in prior research using the common theme of freedom as a practice, which we have illustrated as the deeper cause of giving on Twitch.
- Finally, critical marketing theorists have viewed new technological marketplaces as something of a centrally controlled prison (Panopticon), but our findings show a different view. Our observations on aspects of Twitch users' behavior and motivations illustrate that there is a more beneficial side to the platform, which has positive real-world consequences.

### 6.2 | Contrasting findings with previous research

Existing research has utilized the perspectives of uses and gratifications (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018) and self-determination (Zhao et al., 2018) theories to explain different aspects of game stream

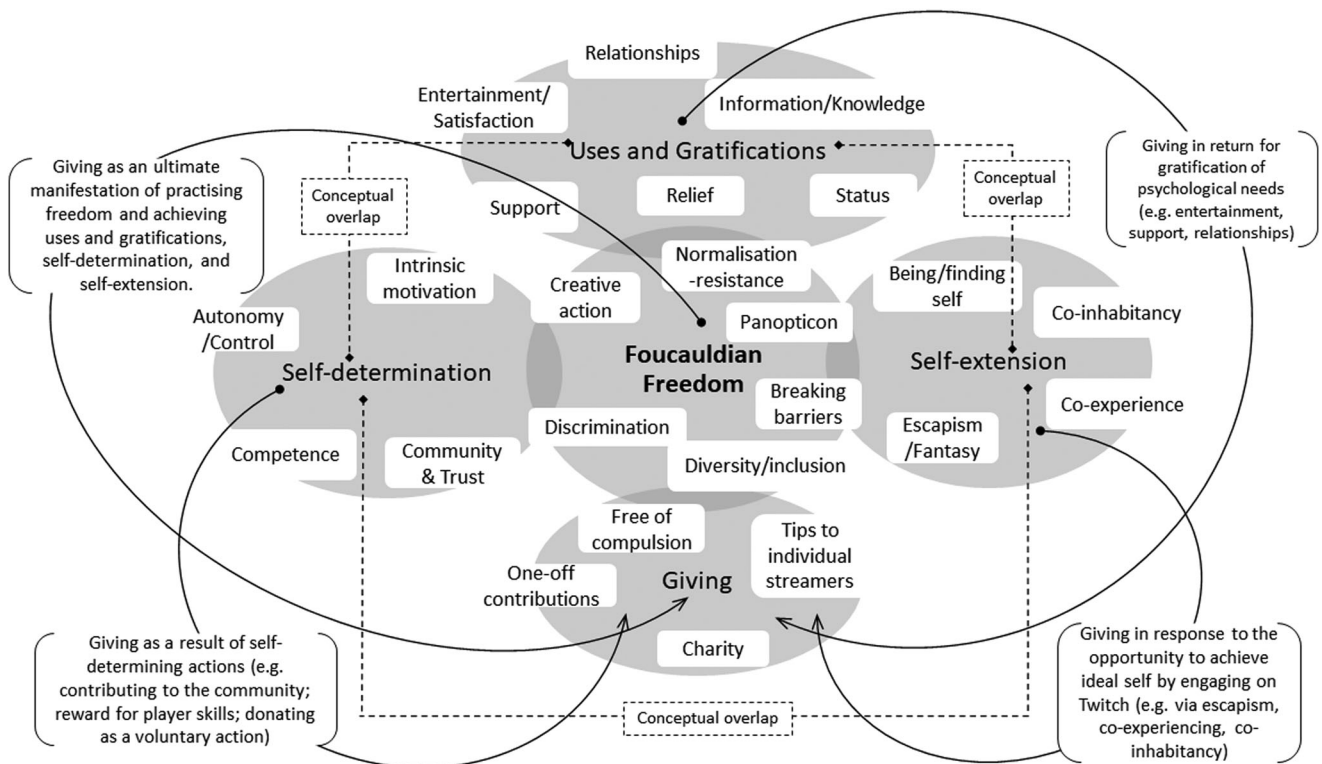


FIGURE 1 Theoretical synthesis of findings

user behavior and engagement. We have integrated these perspectives within one (Foucauldian) theoretical framework, by showing that the disparate elements uncovered by existing work share a common underlying explanation—the users' practice of freedom. Notably, whilst critical marketing theorists see technological marketplaces as a Panopticon (Buchanan-Oliver et al., 2010), a different view emerges from our study. In relatively new (digital) marketplaces such as Twitch, individuals perhaps find a greater degree of emancipation and freedom to create, engage, and become closer to their ideal selves.

We have supported previous claims that game streaming and viewing is a beneficial activity for those with special needs and underlying psychological conditions such as depression and anxiety (cf. Johnson et al., 2017; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015). However, we have further added a psychosocial underpinning to this through the Foucauldian lens. As our findings demonstrate, the support for individuals with psychological problems has been a consistent theme throughout. The fact that so many individuals are able to find support on Twitch is, in the Foucauldian sense, a sign of freedom in action. Individuals who contend with inhibitions in reality are able to achieve uses and gratifications, self-determination, and self-extension by engaging within the Twitch environment.

Individuals coinhabit and coexperience within Twitch, because of the freedom it proffers for self-determination, through creative and rich social interactions, and connectivity beyond boundaries and limitations. Community relationships, status-seeking, and fantasy or escapism play a role in creating this environment of coinhabitancy and coexperience, which appears unique to Twitch. Hence, we add a novel perspective and further insight to previous works (Belk, 2013; Diwanji et al., 2020; Skandalis et al., 2016).

At a broader level, the coinhabitancy of the game stream space and experiencing it with others, are in themselves practices of freedom. Such coinhabitancy and coexperience of this space leads to the “creative breaching” (Dey & Steyaert, 2016) of stereotypes and biases, subsequently leading to diversity and inclusion in the marketplace. On Twitch, power and dominance manifest through asymmetric relationships, such as when an individual suffers from depression or social anxiety that skews their relationship with others. Yet, in creatively and progressively breaching such forms of power and domination, individuals were practising freedom. Such phenomena have been observed in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) previously (Badrinarayanan et al., 2014), but unlike the collaborative game-playing involved in MMORPGs, in game streaming, the gameplay experience is vicarious, which sets apart our findings from existing work.

### 6.3 | Theoretical aspects of giving and fundraising

As users practise freedom, giving emerges as a benevolent outcome of the interactions and relationships formed in the game stream space. As such, there are two main motivations for giving in this respect: (1) extrinsically motivated giving, which occurs in return for the satisfaction of psychological needs and can be based on viewers

identifying themselves with streamers; (2) intrinsically motivated giving, which occurs more naturally and is underpinned by the inherent lack of compulsion to donate, and viewers' personal identification with social causes. Giving, however, is not the only positive outcome in this context; consciousness raising, and publicity of social causes are also significant desirable outcomes.

UGT provides a basic explanation for giving as a price paid in return for the satisfaction of psychological needs. However, we note that giving also arises as a consequence of self-determination and self-extension, which has not been fully explored or explained in previous research (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2017; Molesworth & Denegri-Knott, 2007). An important aspect of donations in the game stream environment is that they occur organically and without commitment, unlike in many traditional fundraising scenarios where repeated aggressive appeals for fundraising have proven counter-productive (Institute for Fundraising, 2017b). Therefore, the Foucauldian lens provides a deeper explanation for giving on Twitch.

The predominant approach in nonprofit marketing has often involved leveraging extrinsic motivations of individuals and even organizations (guilt, tax benefits, constant appeals, etc.), whereas the freedom and diversity (notwithstanding the significant areas for improvement on sexism etc.) within game streams offers nonprofit marketing a much more effective and beneficial eco-system in three ways.

First, donation behavior that is based on intrinsic motivations is likely to be accompanied by a greater sense of happiness and positivity on the part of the individual, as the giving occurs freely without guilt or compulsion (de Peyrelongue et al., 2017). Hence, nonprofit marketing that leverages intrinsic donation behavior is more ethical in that it is conducive to the wellbeing of donors as well as beneficiaries, and sustainable in the longer term, because it affirms the self-determination of individuals (Moller et al., 2006; Özbek et al., 2016). Second, even extrinsically motivated giving can provide effective means of fundraising, which is likely to offer better returns due to strong social identification within game streams. When individuals perceive self-benefit from a product or experience, they may be more willing to donate, so that others too will have the same benefit; this combined with the freedom to choose the beneficiary is found to have a favorable effect on willingness (and the amount) to donate (Jansen et al., 2011). Finally, there is greater scope on Twitch for fundraising, but also for consciousness raising in relation to social causes owing to the potential for engaging younger audiences that are harder to reach via conventional nonprofit marketing. Therefore, the donation behavior on Twitch that we have observed is arguably more dependable, effective, and ethical.

### 6.4 | Practical considerations for nonprofit fundraising on Twitch

Younger generations, in particular, are difficult to reach and engage in the fundraising context and prefer to donate to causes with which they identify; thus, they are more likely to give spontaneously and driven by intrinsic motivations (Fandos, 2016; Institute for

Fundraising, 2017b). Twitch offers connectivity with younger generation through its user communities.

Particularly, Twitch has been used successfully for large scale fundraising for social causes via “charity feeds/streams”, whereby players team up or individually stream game play for long hours or days to raise money for a specific cause; global nonprofits such as Médecins Sans Frontières and Amnesty International have been able to take advantage of this method to raise millions for social causes (The Guardian, 2019). Hence, game streaming platforms such as Twitch offer real potential for regular and unburdensome (for the individual as well as organizations) fundraising for social causes.

Twitch's blog offers specific guidance for nonprofits wishing to raise funds, such as for COVID-19 relief (Twitch, 2020). Further, Twitch is no longer a platform centered around gaming; it is now a full-blown entertainment platform that offers many types of lifestyle streams, including cooking, art, and conversations (Wired, 2020). Therefore, whilst some understanding of Twitch and its community would be useful, nonprofits are not required to have extended technical capabilities, or indeed an affinity towards gaming, to take advantage of Twitch for fundraising purposes.

For new nonprofits wishing to raise funds via Twitch, the first place to start is Twitch's own dedicated support pages, of which there are several that can be found in a basic internet search. A marketing campaign can then be devised around the dedicated streaming event, which will help raise funds, whether it be a game stream (usually lasting many hours of live game play) or some other form. A dedicated web-page should be set up by the nonprofit to give visibility, to attract not only donors, but also game streamers. The nonprofit's social media channels could then disseminate relevant information and promote the event.

Leading Twitch content creators (streamers) are highly influential. For nonprofits, such streamers with established fan bases (large following) are better placed to partner with, as new streamers will struggle to attract sufficient attention (and therefore, donations) due to lack of regular following, but also credibility. Credibility of the streamer is important, because potential donors need to be able to trust that the funds are being raised for a legitimate cause and that substantial proceeds will reach the nonprofit and its beneficiaries.

Finally, a trusted third-party interface is necessary for handling the logistics of funds transfers, which can be integrated into the live stream environment. Twitch recommends Tiltify (<http://www.tiltify.com>), which is the leading peer-to-peer interactive fundraising platform—it can be directly integrated into Twitch's live stream events and interactively handles the process of taking and transferring funds directly to the nonprofit behind the event. The donation process itself is made easier on Twitch with the inclusion of a large “donate” button on the screen or player profiles, and the ability to pay via different methods such as PayPal and even cryptocurrencies. The streamers will be able to set this up as they are the hosts of the event, which therefore simplifies the process for the nonprofits involved. However, as we observed in our findings, the interface should not over-promote the fundraising part in a way that viewers feel pressured to donate. Although the event is (and should

be) clearly marketed as a charity stream, nonprofits (and streamers) involved should acknowledge the central role of viewers' autonomous choice in the platform's usefulness for raising funds sustainably—if viewers feel hounded for donations, rather than feeling naturally drawn to the stream, and perhaps the cause, the fundraising will not be as effective or repeatable. Displaying a target figure with a progress bar, and following a schedule are good practices for streamers raising funds for nonprofits.

## 6.5 | Limitations and further research

It is worth noting that our study examined some specific aspects of Twitch. Our empirical investigation and the subsequent discussions reflect this. As such, it would be wrong to form a negative or skewed view of online gaming environments in general from our findings.

As the gaming industry outperforms the film and music industries, its business potential is well-understood (Seo et al., 2019). Notwithstanding, there is a need to consider the wellbeing of users alongside the substantial entertainment potential of gaming platforms. Future studies may address the limitations of our current attempt by further investigating the state of sexism and misogyny within game streams, but also racism and other related issues, which were beyond our scope. In addition, better fundraising strategies can be developed by conducting intervention-based studies or experiments within game stream environments. Game streams themselves are fast-evolving, and the technological changes to these marketplaces will result in corresponding changes in consumer behavior (e.g., *In Real Life* streaming) that need to be studied and understood, for which the present study may serve as a springboard.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Our main contributions to theory and practice in the areas of game streaming, technological marketplaces, and nonprofit marketing are threefold. First, we have consolidated the main observations from previous research into three main areas (uses and gratifications, self-determination, and self-extension) and have illustrated the interplay between these theoretical concepts empirically. Further, adding a novel perspective to extant literature, we have shown how the Foucauldian notion of freedom can offer a deeper explanation for the theoretical and empirical observations in these three areas. Finally, we have illustrated how giving emerges in this context as a positive outcome of Twitch users practising freedom in the Foucauldian sense. From a broader perspective, this paper forms part of an emergent stream of literature that emphasizes stakeholder wellbeing and responsibility in marketing (e.g., Pedersen, 2021; Yoganathan et al., 2021), as well as infuses rich theoretical foundations from other disciplines into marketing (e.g., Otterbring, 2021).

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are not publicly available due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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**How to cite this article:** Yoganathan, V., Osburg, V., & Stevens, C. J. (2021). Freedom and giving in game streams: A Foucauldian exploration of tips and donations on Twitch. *Psychology & Marketing*. 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21483>