

# From Screen to Self: Streamers' Personal Branding and the Development of Young Men

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## Abstract

**Background and Aim.** As young men navigate personal developmental challenges, they often look up to influential figures, whose carefully crafted personal brands, potentially provide guidance. This includes live streamers, who position themselves and their personal brands as role models. Understanding how these personal brands contribute to shaping young men's identity and aspirations is important for grasping their role in personal development. Therefore, this study examined the following research question: *How does the personal branding of popular streamers and content creators on live-streaming platforms relate to the personal development of young men?*

**Methods.** A qualitative approach was used, combining live-stream observations and semi-structured interviews. Observations were conducted on live-stream platforms, focusing on the personal branding strategies of six popular streamers. Semi-structured interviews were then held with twelve male viewers aged 16-24, exploring how streamers' branding impacted their personal development, values, and aspirations. Thematic analysis was applied to both observation and interview data to identify patterns and themes.

**Results.** The study revealed four main findings. First, authenticity was identified as an essential component of personal branding. Second, personalized interactions, boosted engagement and financial support. Third, the personality of the streamer is central to both viewer loyalty and engagement. Lastly, community belonging and emotional support play an important role in areas such as engagement, motivation to follow, social values, and financial contributions.

**Conclusion.** Streamers' personal branding, particularly their focus on authenticity and interaction, can be used to potentially shape young men's personal development. Streamers who engage with their audience in a genuine and relatable manner foster stronger

connections, long-term loyalty, and influence social behaviors, which can guide efforts to emphasize emotional and personal development over commercial success.

*Keywords:* personal branding, live-streaming, personal development, young men, audience engagement, authenticity, viewer interaction

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# Introduction

In the current age of digital dominance, influential streamers and content creators have risen to the forefront as formidable personalities on social media and live-streaming platforms (Gong, 2024). According to Morgenroth et al. (2015), these internet personas captivate millions, forming a novel realm of influence and inspiration. Live-streaming influences the digital landscape in terms of engagement and interaction (Melani & Ahmad Zamzamy, 2023; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). In this context, personal branding plays an important part in shaping the influence of streamers, especially with the rise of online platforms such as Twitch.TV, YouTube Live, Kick, and Facebook Live, which facilitate real-time content distribution and consumption (El Afi & Ouiddad, 2021). Live streaming has become an important method for businesses and individuals to create real-time connections and improve brand recognition (Meisner & Ledbetter, 2022). For streamers, personal branding could be essential for constructing an online persona, as consumers' purchase intentions are significantly impacted by the personas of well-known live streamers, highlighting the role of personal branding in influencing consumer behavior (Bing et al., 2024). For particular individuals such as celebrities and influencers, streaming services have therefore become very appealing.

Given this trend, it becomes essential to delve into the concept of personal branding on these platforms. Personal branding can be defined as “a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based in a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery” (Gorbatov et al., 2018, p. 6). Personal branding for streamers and content creators entails the development and promotion of a distinctive character to distinguish oneself in the digital realm (Gorbatov et al., 2018). This is achieved by the utilization of one's identity, the topics they address, their communication style, and the

affiliations they form with other businesses (Schouten et al., 2020). Businesses are progressively utilizing social media influencers for marketing purposes, acknowledging the significance of their own brands in effectively engaging consumers (Jorge et al., 2018). Twitch is a widely used site for live streaming video games and utilizing personal branding, as previously mentioned.

In December 2023, over 70% of the internet visitors on the streaming site Twitch were male (Clement, 2024). Geysler (2024) reported that 36% of the viewers in 2022 fell between the age range of 18 to 24. Men in this age range show more sensitivity to both internal and external obstacles related to personal growth. These development challenges encompass the establishment of interpersonal relationships (Wittchen et al., 1998), the development of masculinity and sexuality (Shivji et al., 2021), the pursuit of a career, and the evolution of behavioural patterns (Hicks et al., 2007). This gender and age group represents a critical period during which individuals are developing a more defined sense of self, forming important relationships, and taking on new responsibilities, all of which may influence their perspectives on society norms, values, and life aspirations. In the context of this study, the following definition of values will be used: Values refer to a person's "fundamental beliefs, behaviours and attitudes that have been approved and accepted as what is good by society for a long time" (Gamage et al., 2021, p. 1).

As stated, young men are sensitive to outside influences, especially those triggered by their role models and media (Abrams, 2022), including streamers and content providers. In this important stage of personal development, young males often search for guidance and inspiration while managing the complexities of forming their identity, satisfying society expectations, and following life goals. Studies suggest that young males in this specific group are more vulnerable to the impact of their role models, who may significantly change their attitudes, behaviours, and goals (Bird et al., 2012; Bowers et al., 2016; Richardson, 2009).

Streamers and content creators have an impact on the opinions and actions of their young male viewers due to their direct connection with their followers and large online presence. Social integration, financial awareness, and peer pressure (Anthony et al., 2021; Stoebenau et al., 2013) shape young men's financial actions towards streamers. Streamers employ monetization techniques including subscriptions, and donations (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). Investigating the complicated nature of personal branding among these streamers and content providers is therefore important for fully understanding the possible influence on the development, spending behaviour on live-streaming platforms, values, and ambitions of young men in the digital age.

In conclusion, although streamers and content creators are consistently seen on streaming platforms such as Twitch, the specific impact of their personal branding on the development, spending behaviour on live-stream platforms, norms and values, and future aspirations of young men has not been extensively examined. Exploring how the branding strategies used by these role models relate to the perspectives and behaviour of the young, predominantly male audience might yield insightful findings. Additionally, a deeper understanding may be gained by examining the role streamers and content creators play shaping young men's identities and aspirations. These inquiries highlight the significance of examining how a streamer's personal branding relate to the well-being and development of young males in the digital era. Thus, this study seeks to address these gaps by examining:

*How does the personal branding of popular streamers and content creators on live-streaming platform relate to the personal development of young men?*

This study contributes to the academic fields of sociology, media psychology, marketing disciplines, and communication studies by providing innovative perspectives of personal branding and identity formation in digital environments. In particular, it offers a novel exploration of how the branding strategies of streamers and content creators are perceived by and shape the personal development of young males. This study offers value to grasp the wider consequences of online media in forming identity, society norms, and behavioral patterns by filling in gaps in the present literature. Moreover, the research clarifies how digital influencers shape young people in the framework of changing media environments.

An in-depth understanding of the link between the personal branding of well-known streamers and content creators and the development, values, and ambitions of young males carries substantial practical relevance. This is important for multiple parties involved, such as marketers, advertisers, educators, and mental health experts. Marketers may utilize the findings of this research to develop more efficient branding strategies specifically designed to captivate and connect with young male consumers on social media and live-streaming platforms. To enhance brand affinity and consumer engagement, advertisers should align their messaging and campaigns with the values and aspirations reflected in the personal branding of influencers. Teachers can utilize the results of this study to develop media literacy programs aimed at instructing adolescent males in dealing with online content. Mental health professionals can develop specialized therapies or certain support services by drawing on their knowledge gained from this study. In conclusion, this research has significant practical relevance for enhancing advertising strategies, promoting media literacy education, and strengthening mental health support networks for young males in the digital era.

This study employed a qualitative approach, combining observations of live-stream sessions from both well-known and less-known streamers and semi-structured interviews with



young male viewers. The observations focus on the personal branding strategies employed by the live-streamers, while the interviews explore how these branding tactics shape the identity, values, and aspirations, of the viewers. Patterns and insights from the gathered data have been identified by means of thematic analysis.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This chapter starts by examining the theoretical foundation, with particular emphasis on the Two-Step Flow of Information and Parasocial Interaction Theory. The selected theories offer a robust framework for analyzing the role of influential media figures, such as streamers and content creators, in shaping audience behavior, personal development, and engagement. This will be followed by an exploration of the main concept of this study, namely personal branding. Following that, this framework will focus on the adolescent mind, highlighting adolescence as a period of significant changes in physical and mental development, beliefs, objectives, and decision-making mechanisms. Subsequently, this study will explore three distinct domains: financial decision-making among adolescents, social norms among adolescents, and life ambitions among adolescents.

### **Two-Step Flow of Information**

The personal branding of well-known streamers and content creators on social media and live-streaming platforms potentially plays a significant role in shaping the development, principles, and ambitions of young men. This possibility is inherently connected to the notion of the two-step flow of information. The two-step flow theory suggests that information is transmitted from mass media to opinion leaders, who subsequently distribute this knowledge to their followers, so impacting their opinions and actions (Kim & Chakraborty, 2024). Social media influencers, such as streamers and content creators, serve as these opinion leaders,

influencing the beliefs of their followers (De Veirman et al., 2017). The two-step flow's relevance is underscored by the significant impact of influencers' self-presentational objectives on public debates and conversations (Winter & Neubaum, 2016), which motivate followers to engage and share content (Turcotte et al., 2015).

By enabling streamers to share content in a more personalized and engaging approach, live streaming strengthens the two-step information flow. Viewers can actively participate by leaving comments, liking, and sharing content, which creates a sense of community and belonging (Cui et al., 2022; Samat et al., 2019). Because of its interactive features, viewers and streamers may collaborate to create content, which encourages investment and increases the possibility that users would share it on the internet (Dong et al., 2022; Fan et al., 2022). As a result, viewers of live streams play an important role in constructing the two-step information flow, as they constantly receive information from the streamer, who acts as an opinion leader.

According to Ming et al. (2021), live streamers improve audience involvement and attention by developing a social media presence through personal branding. Having a strong personal brand and social presence enables streamers to offer customized services based on the needs of their audience, creating a relationship that exceeds traditional media exchanges. Live streamers may become opinion leaders in their communities and could shape the beliefs and actions of their followers by developing a strong personal brand (Scheidt et al., 2020). This enhances the concept of the two-step flow of information as live streamers could become influential figures who potentially shape the opinions and behaviors of their followers through, for example, personal branding.

Although the two-step flow of information theory offers an understanding into how streamers and content creators can influence opinions and actions, it is still unclear how

this process specifically relates to the development, values, and aspirations of young males during their important and impressionable life phase.

## **Parasocial Interaction Theory**

The theory of parasocial interaction is important for comprehending the process by which individuals establish one-sided connections with media personalities, celebrities, influencers, and content creators, particularly on social media platforms. The parasocial interaction theory, originally proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956), posits that individuals can experience a sense of connection and intimacy with media characters, even in the absence of real-life engagement or mutual exchange (Bogaards, 2021). This theory has been applied in other situations, including influencer marketing, where the establishment of parasocial relationships between influencers, such as streamers and content creators, and their followers has been linked to higher levels of loyalty and an increased willingness to spend more money on recommended items (Zha et al., 2023).

In the context of influencers, such as streamers and content creators, the parasocial interaction theory sheds light on the dynamics of viewer-streamer relationships. Streamers' interactional communication strategies are essential for promoting immersion, parasocial interactions, and influencing viewers' purchase intentions (Liao et al., 2023). The concept that influencers utilize content and interaction strategies to establish parasocial relationships with their audience is supported by the fact that parasocial relationships are established through verbal and non-verbal signals on social media (Aw et al., 2023).

The interactive character of live streaming enables real-time communication between streamers and spectators, which encourages the establishment of parasocial relationships by developing a sense of immediacy and intimacy (McLaughlin & Wohn, 2021). This parasocial affinity is established as a result of the direct interaction between viewers and the streamers,

which, in conjunction with the authenticity of live performances, fosters a stronger connection (Kneisel & Sternadori, 2023). Research has shown that parasocial interaction has a substantial impact on a variety of consumer behavior factors, such as brand credibility, loyalty, tendency to pay a premium, and purchase intention (Kim et al., 2022; Shahid et al., 2023).

Previous research has employed quantitative methodologies to investigate parasocial interactions (e.g., Kim et al., 2022; Zha et al., 2023). However, it remains unknown how these one-sided interactions relate to young men's development, values, and ambitions, particularly in the context of live-streaming platforms, from a qualitative perspective. Additionally, prior research indicates that real-time communication are essential components of the development of parasocial relationships (Kneisel & Sternadori, 2023; McLaughlin & Wohn, 2021). Nevertheless, there is a lack of understanding regarding the extent to which the personal branding of a streamer shapes the live-stream spending behavior, societal norms, and life goals of young males. By investigating the components of a streamer's personal branding that might shape the development of their young male audience and facilitate parasocial interactions in live-streaming environments, this study seeks to address these gaps.

## **Personal Branding**

Personal branding for streamers and content creators entails the deliberate development and marketing of a distinct personality that sets them apart from their peers in the online realm. This process encompasses several factors, including the creator's personality, the subjects they address, the tone of their communication, the context in which they portray themselves, and the brands they align with (Tarnovskaya, 2017). Streamers and content creators utilize their own identities to construct unique brands, utilizing platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch to interact with their audiences and foster consumer engagement as personal brands (D. Kim, 2024; H. Zhang & Lee, 2023). Therefore, personal

branding can be defined as “a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based in a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery” (Gorbatov et al., 2018).

Companies are increasingly utilizing social media influencers, such as vloggers, content creators and streamers, for marketing reasons in the field of social media (Geysler, 2024b). They acknowledge the significance of these influencers' personal brands in effectively engaging with audiences (Jorge et al., 2018; Schouten et al., 2020). The degree to which content creators leverage technical infrastructure, such as live-streaming platforms, and their comfort with using these tools, determines their efficacy with regard to branding techniques (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). The content they provide not only mirrors their own brand but also aids in the establishment of a brand community, strengthening the collaborative process of value creation between customers and enterprises (Schau et al., 2009).

The success of streamers and content creators on streaming platforms like Twitch is determined by several elements, including their personality, technical proficiency, and the effectiveness of their engagement methods in connecting with viewers (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). Content creators may effectively connect with their audience and generate a devoted following by developing a self-brand that is tailored to the unique platform's features, the expectations of the audience, and their own self-concept (Scolere et al., 2018). Therefore, personal brand can be defined as “a set of characteristics of an individual (attributes, values, beliefs, etc.) rendered into the differentiated narrative and imagery with the intent of establishing a competitive advantage in the minds of the target audience” (Gorbatov et al., 2018). This could be very important on live streaming platforms for attracting, retaining, and influencing viewers.

Young males, being in a critical and vulnerable stage of life, are especially sensitive to be affected by personal branding techniques applied by live streamers. Their search for role models and direction motivates them to engage with these personal brands, and therefore potentially shaping their values, objectives, and behaviour. This setting emphasizes the significance of exploring the ways in which young men engage with and are impacted by these personal branding efforts on live streaming platforms. However, it remains unclear how specifically young men engage with a live streamers' personal branding strategies and their personal brand characteristics. In order to obtain a thorough understanding of this occurrence, the following sub-question is established:

*SQ1: How do young men perceive and engage with the personal branding strategies of live streamers?*

## **Live-Streaming Dynamics**

Live streams provide exclusive opportunities for connection and engagement that are different from other types of media contents. Live streams offer a unique kind of communication where the streamer and their audience may communicate in real-time, enabling instant feedback, conversation, engagement, and interaction (Wang, 2019; Xu et al., 2023). The dynamic nature of live streams gives streamers a chance to show their personalities and personal branding in a way that feels authentic and spontaneous, even though it is often influenced by what their audience expects. In addition, live streams frequently incorporate interactive components such as chat rooms, polls, and Q&A sessions, which serve to boost audience engagement and involvement.

Streaming platforms like Kick and Twitch provide distinct opportunities for interaction and engagement owing to their specialized interactive features, initiatives and community-

driven involvement. Features like a “like spike”, when streamers motivate viewers to quickly like the stream in order to enhance its exposure (Meisner, 2023), demonstrate how personal branding can affect collective audience behavior. This occurrence frequently arises when viewers actively and positively interact with the stream, maybe owing to captivating material, noteworthy occurrences, or viral incidents (Meisner, 2023). Spikes in viewership may enhance a streamer's exposure, engagement metrics, and general mood, generating a positive feedback loop that can attract additional viewers and improve the streaming experience. This demonstrates how personal branding may affect the actions of a collective audience. Donations and other types of interaction and consumption may play an important role in comprehending the financial relationship between streamers and their viewers.

The conversation section (chat) on these platforms, such as Twitch (Twitch, 2024), may also play a key role in shaping and strengthening the perception of personal branding. The chat enables reactions to the streamer's actions, personality, opinions, and questions. The chat can boost engagement and offer some insight into how the audience is responding to the content, but it is important to recognize that it is not always a reliable indicator of the streamer's branding impact. Factors like bots, disruptive users, and other interruptions can skew the conversation, making it difficult to fully gauge genuine audience reactions. This interaction can also influence parasocial relationships, where viewers form one-sided bonds with streamers. Intensifying their connection through direct and real-time interactions.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of 'raiding' in live streaming refers to a streamer sending their audience to another streamer's channel at the end of their own stream, encouraging viewers to continue watching content on the new channel (Cai et al., 2023). This technique serves as a means for streamers to mutually assist one another, foster a sense of community, and introduce their audience with new content makers. Engaging in raiding may be advantageous for emerging streamers as it facilitates the acquisition of visibility, amplifies

their audience, and nurtures relationships within the streaming community (Cai et al., 2023). The act of raiding may have a substantial impact on the dynamics of a community and the loyalty of viewers. This strategy shows how streamers utilize their personal branding to support one another and keep their audience engaged across many platforms.

In order to obtain a thorough understanding of the live-stream dynamics, the following sub-question is established:

*SQ2: How do young men perceive the role of live-stream platforms in shaping the personal branding of their favorite streamers?*

## **The Mind of Adolescents**

This research concentrates on Dutch young men between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four, a period in their lives during which they are in the process of discovering their identity, gaining independence, and being greatly impacted by their peers (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2024). This group's engagement with personal branding on live-streaming platforms proves especially interesting due to these developmental changes.

The transition between these two ages encompasses a significant degree of transformation in several aspects of development, including biological, cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional changes. Personal connections and social environments undergo significant transformations, with friends and romantic partners assuming greater importance (Bonnie & Backes, 2019). Adolescence is therefore a period of substantial transformation in an individual's development (Balogh et al., 2013), values (Pinquart et al., 2004), goals (Beal & Crockett, 2010a), and decision-making processes (Pincham et al., 2019).

Adolescence signifies a crucial phase in which individuals are cultivating a more distinct identity, establishing significant connections, and assuming additional obligations, all



of which could lead to changes in their viewpoints on societal standards and life goals (Beal & Crockett, 2010b; Mello, 2008; Nepirly & Climie, 2023). During this phase, adolescent males are more vulnerable to external influences, such as the influence of streamers and content creators who may greatly impact their developing identities and goals through the streamers' personal branding. Although there has been extensive research on the developmental transformations in decision-making that occur throughout adolescence (Blakemore & Robbins, 2012; Pincham et al., 2019) the understanding of how external factors, such as personal branding by streamers and content creators, intersect with these changes remains unclear.

When the dynamics of live streaming and personal branding are combined with this age group's susceptibility to external influences, it reveals the importance of further exploring how these digital interactions contribute to adolescent identity development.

## **Financial Behaviour**

The financial component of these young men's behaviour is intricate and impacted by several aspects like financial stress, social integration, financial knowledge, and money-related attitudes (Anthony et al., 2021; Utkarsh et al., 2020). The financial decisions made by young males can be shaped by factors such as economic fragility, social standing, and the desire to conform to their peer groups (Stoebenau et al., 2013).

Johnson & Woodcock (2019), determined that streamers utilize a range of methods to generate income, including "subscriptions, donations/cheering, advertising, sponsorships, competitions/targets, unpredictable rewards, and channel games." This research examines the methods involving viewer contributions, including subscribing, donating/cheering, competitions/targets, and unpredictable rewards. Subscriptions entail regular payments and grant viewers exclusive chat icons. Donations and cheers provide individuals with the

opportunity to offer monetary contributions, accompanied with unique chat symbols. Competitions engage viewers by tempting them with financial objectives and fostering a sense of rivalry. Unpredictable rewards, such as animations or noises, contribute to the thrill and strengthen audience support. Young men may be especially attracted to these monetization strategies because of their desire for acknowledgment, social engagement, and the thrill of participating in and interacting with the communities of their favorite streamers.

Viewers are motivated to financially engage with streamers due to relationship-driven attachment (Zhang et al., 2024), social interaction, community involvement (Xu et al., 2022), streamer expertise, entertainment value (Wang, 2024), perceived integrity, and the desire to support and connect with streamers (Giertz et al., 2022). These motivations drive viewers to subscribe, tip, donate, and purchase virtual gifts, creating a symbiotic relationship between viewers and streamers in the live streaming ecosystem.

Whereas there is considerable research on the various factors that drive viewers to financially support streamers (Giertz et al., 2022; Wang, 2024; Xu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024) there is still a notable lack of information regarding the role of streamers' personal branding in shaping the experiences and perspectives of young males during their important and influential developmental phase. The relationship between various components of a streamer's personal brand, such as authenticity, relatability, and perceived success, and how these impact the financial choices of young men with distinct psychological and social traits remains uncertain. Moreover, the extent to which these branding techniques might influence long-term financial behaviors and perspectives in young men, beyond immediate monetary donations, is not adequately understood. In order to obtain a thorough understanding of this occurrence, the following sub-question is established:

*SQ3: How do young men perceive the personal branding of their favourite streamers and content creators in relation to their own spending behaviors on streaming platforms, such as donating, subscriptions, or other financial contributions?*

## **Social Norms**

Various factors, such as social norms, family-related dynamics, and peer pressure, shape young men's perception of masculinity and gender roles (Watkins et al., 2013). Young men frequently admire influential individuals in the media and entertainment industry as role models possibly influencing their understanding of masculinity and self-image (Goodwill et al., 2019). The portrayal of masculinity in media can have a substantial impact on the perceptions and self-identities of young men (Goodwill et al., 2019). Moreover, the formation of masculinity and the establishment of personal values in young men are continuous procedures that are impacted by several aspects, such as social assistance, peer engagements, and cultural standards (Larsson et al., 2021). For the purpose of this study, masculinity will be described as a collection of characteristics, actions, and societal attitudes that are typically linked to males (Constance, 2018).

Especially, in the setting of online platforms and romantic relationships, the media's portrayal of masculinity can result in differences in the way young men interpret social norms (Daniels, 2020). Young men's identities are shaped not only by standard norms of society but also by the personas and brands of media celebrities they adore (Kang & Park, 2022; Pool et al., 2020). Particularly for streamers, personal branding could shape how these young men perceive their positions within their social groups and larger society.

Studies have demonstrated that brand legitimacy is produced by the alignment with socially desired values, norms, and regulations (Amani, 2024). Brands establish their legitimacy by conforming to the collective norms and values of a social group, highlighting

the significance of complying with society expectations (Villegas & Marin, 2022). Evans et al. (2019) argue that branding may be utilized to facilitate the promotion of changes in social norms. Brand involvement on social media is associated with brand equity through the expression of social identity, emphasizing the interdependence between social norms and brand perceptions (Perera et al., 2023).

Research has shown that young men's masculinity and gender roles are shaped by peer pressure, family, social norms, and media portrayals, influencing their understanding of masculinity, self-image, and values (Constance, 2018; Daniels, 2020; Goodwill et al., 2019; Watkins et al., 2013). Brand legitimacy is tied to aligning with socially desired values, norms, and regulations, promoting changes in social norms and enhancing brand equity through social identity (Amani, 2024; Evans et al., 2019; Perera et al., 2023; Villegas & Marin, 2022). Understanding how these two outcomes intersect would enable a deeper insight into how the personal branding by streamers shapes young men's perceptions of social norms and masculinity. In order to obtain a thorough understanding of this occurrence, the following sub-question is established:

*SQ4: How do young men perceive the personal branding of their favourite streamers and content creators in relation to their own social values and norms?*

## Life Objectives

An area that requires investigation is the potential impact of personal branding on the life goals and aspirations of young males, as displayed by streamers and content creators on live-streaming platforms. In order to fully understand the potential influence of these public figures on the perceptions and aspirations of their young male audiences, it is necessary to first understand several factors that contribute to their opinions and decisions.

The impact of role models on the aspirations of young males might be significant. Role models, such as streamers and content creators, can influence the way young men view achievement and help them establish their life goals (Wilson et al., 2022). Role models act as drivers of motivation and inspiration for individuals who are actively pursuing their goals (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Role models might enhance the perception of achievable accomplishment by offering a concrete illustration of what can be attained and the methods to accomplish it (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). The influence of role models is more significant when individuals possess comparable features or ideals to their role models (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Lockwood, 2006). For instance, individuals often select role models whose achievements are in line with their ethical principles, resulting in a stronger impact on their own ambitions (Lockwood, 2006).

Research has indicated that young adults tend to place greater importance on internal desires such as personal development and social connections, rather than external ones such as wealth and popularity (Niemic et al., 2009). Nevertheless, uncertainty occurs when adolescent males have difficulties in aligning their own ambitions with society anticipations and gender norms (Buschor et al., 2014). This ambiguity can be additionally intensified by variables such as race (Wilson et al., 2017), socioeconomic status (Hoyland et al., 2021), and family dynamics (Fischer, 2007).

The alignment between an individual's current and desired identities might influence their level of enthusiasm for brands (Astakhova et al., 2017), and consequently, their life objectives and aspirations. Brands are intentionally created to focus on particular demographics, such as young adults, by capitalizing on their uncertainties and ambitions (Hoek et al., 2012). Research has demonstrated that aspirations can impact the choice for luxury brands, with extrinsic aspirations having a favorable influence and internal aspirations having an unfavorable effect (Truong et al., 2010). Consumers frequently develop emotional connections to companies that closely match their individual ambitions, anxieties, or life pursuits (Park et al., 2010).

While some research has explored the influence of media figures on young men's life objectives and aspirations (Lockwood, 2006; Wilson et al., 2022), the specific role of a streamers' personal branding on live streaming platforms in shaping the life objectives and ambitions of young men remains largely unknown. Young men are frequently exposed to streamers' carefully crafted personal brands, which emphasize success, wealth, and fame, during a critical period of self-development, where they are particularly vulnerable to external influences (Buschor et al., 2014; Fischer, 2007). Understanding how young men perceive and respond to these brands is essential to gaining insight into their own life goals. In order to obtain a thorough understanding of this occurrence, the following sub-question is established:

*SQ5: How do young men perceive the personal branding of their favourite streamers and content creators in relation to their own life objectives and aspirations?*

# Methodology

In this section, an overview of the methodologies employed in this study is provided. The methods are divided into four primary sections: design, participants, procedure, and data analysis. The design phase entails the structure and overall design of the research. The participants section outlines the individuals who participated in the research and the process by which they were selected, which was directly influenced by the observations made during the design phase. The procedure section subsequently breaks down the steps that were taken to conduct the research. Finally, the section on data analysis shows how the collected data were processed.

## Design

This study employed a qualitative approach, combining live-stream observations and semi-structured interviews to explore how the personal branding of prominent streamers and content creators on live-streaming platforms relates to the development, spending behavior, values, and aspirations of young men. Observation is a well-established method in qualitative research, enabling systematic data collection through careful observation of behaviors and interactions (Smit & Onwuegbuzie, 2018). Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, are particularly suited for exploring complex issues, providing opportunities for deeper understanding and clarification of participant responses (Wilson, 2014).

An informal content analysis was carried out prior to the gathering of data in order to chart the personal branding efforts that streamers engage in on social media platforms. These insights served as the foundation for how streamers presented themselves online.

The initial phase entailed the observation of live streams from popular streamers that were identified in the informal content analysis. Live stream content was observed on platforms such as Twitch and Kick. Various aspects of personal branding, such as audience engagement, audience reactions, and audience interaction, were documented in these

observations. Content categories were categorized and engagement metrics were assessed using a structured approach. Themes such as personal branding, development, values, and aspirations were given particular emphasis during the observations.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with young male viewers, who frequently observed the selected streamers in response to the observations. This qualitative method enabled an in-depth examination of how the streamers' personal branding was perceived by the participants in relation to their own development, values, and aspirations. The respondents' interactions with streamers, how they interpreted personal branding, and how it related to their goals and behavior were all discussed throughout the interview.

The ethical guidelines involving human participants were continually observed and respected during the course of this study. Before the interviews, informed consent had been requested and obtained from every participant; they were additionally informed of their right to cancel and withdraw from the interview at any point. All data were anonymized to safeguard the participants' identity and therefore guarantee confidentiality and privacy. These steps were taken to protect the trust of respondents and their well-being, therefore guaranteeing ethical compliance and full transparency during this research.

## **Participants**

First, participants were identified by observing different live-streams of six different streamers on the live-streaming platforms Twitch and Kick. The chosen live streamers will be introduced and explained in the upcoming pre-test section. Two distinct groups of live streamers were observed: American streamers with a worldwide audience and Dutch streamers with a primarily Dutch viewership. While the Dutch streamers mostly attracted viewers from the Netherlands, the American streamers mostly attracted viewers from the United States and other English-speaking countries. These live streams were focused on categories like gaming, 'just chatting', IRL (In Real Life), or a combination of these. One



Dutch streamer and one American streamer each focused specifically on one of these three main categories.

Secondly, this study employed purposive sampling to select participants based on specific criteria, including age, gender, and level of engagement, which were directly aligned with the research objectives. The selection criteria required participants to be male and between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four. Additionally, the participants had to be consistent observers or followers of the chosen streamers, meaning the participants watched their streams at least once a week and followed them for longer than three months. Both active and passive participants were selected. Active participants engage with the content through regular interactions such as comments, likes, and shares. Passive participants simply watch the streams without engaging. The participant approach involved several stages. Individuals who met the selection criteria were contacted directly through messages on the streaming platforms where they were observed. Each direct message contained a description of the study, detailing its purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality measures in place. They were subsequently invited to participate.

Participants who expressed willingness to participate were asked to schedule an interview via Microsoft Teams at a mutually convenient date and time. This process aimed to include a diverse range of participants from various educational backgrounds, interests, and geographic areas. Before the interviews were conducted, written consent was obtained from the participants. Ultimately, a total of twelve participants were selected, a sample size deemed adequate to achieve the study's objectives and provide a thorough understanding of the research question.

## **Procedure**

The procedure section describes the step-by-step process of data collection, detailing how the data were collected, the order in which activities occurred, and the specific processes or activities participants engaged in. Data collection was carried out in three phases: a pre-test to gather background information, observations of live streams, and semi-structured interviews with participants.

### ***Pre-test***

The pre-test phase was used to gather background information and to profile and select the streamers for observation. This analysis focused on the social media activity of selected content creators and live streamers, specifically focusing on Instagram posts from the years 2023 and 2024. Six streamers and content creators were selected based on the following criteria: they must stream regularly and consistently, have a substantial follower base (with three high-profile streamers having a minimum of 7.5 million followers and three mid-level streamers having fewer than one million followers), and demonstrate diverse content themes such as gaming, ‘just chatting’, IRL (In Real Life). These streamers included Ninja (Richard Tyler Blevins), TimTheTatman (Timothy John Betar), who stream from the USA. Symfuhny (Mason Lanier), who streams from the UK. Roedie (Rudi Wijnen), Milan Knol, and Serpent (Rick Broers), who stream from the Netherlands. Together, they represent a balanced group of three English-speaking live-streamers and three Dutch-speaking live-streamers.

### ***Observations***

The observation phase systematically collected data on the behavior, interactions, and personal branding strategies of streamers on platforms such as Twitch and Kick. Accounts were created on both platforms specifically for this study. Observation sessions, which were recorded, took place over a two-week period, encompassing 13 hours of live stream

observations. Each session lasted approximately one hour and was scheduled at various times to capture diverse audience interactions and behaviors.

Observations focused on five key aspects. First, stream data such as likes, shares, comments, and viewers were noted at regular intervals throughout the live streams. Second, statements made by the streamer were noted, including responses to the audience, promotional activities, and personal stories or brand-related narratives. Third, chat reactions to these statements were observed. Fourth, the interaction between the streamer and the chat was monitored, noting how the streamer engaged with their viewers in real-time. Finally, reactions from the chat to specific events during the stream, such as in-game achievements, announcements, or technical issues, were noted. Detailed field notes documented the streamers' personal branding strategies, audience engagement techniques, and methods of interaction with viewers. All data collected were recorded and stored digitally.

### *Interviews*

The final step in this research involved conducting semi-structured interviews with young male viewers of these streamers and content creators. Semi-structured interviews combine open-ended questions with a predefined framework to allow full subject research while preserving consistency (Kallio et al., 2016). Semi-structured interviews let researchers get detailed responses from participants. This allows researchers to get insights into complex events and personal experiences (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This method allows respondents to freely express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions (Laursen & Meijboom, 2021; Oerther, 2021). The primary objective of these interviews was to acquire comprehensive understanding of the participants regarding their perceptions of the personal branding exhibited by their preferred streamers or content creators, as well as the manner in which it shaped and related to their behavior, financial decisions, and ambitions.

Based on the live-stream observations, participants were selected to partake in online interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. All specific requirements for the participants and the recruitment process of the participants can be found in the participant section. Consent was obtained by informing participants about the purpose of the interview, assuring them of their anonymity, and explaining that they could withdraw at any time without consequences. Explicit consent to record the interview sessions was also secured.

At the start of each interview, participants were given a detailed explanation of the interview's objectives. Additionally, Microsoft Teams' built-in transcription software was used to transcribe the interviews in real-time. The participants were reassured that their responses would be kept confidential. The interview began with an introduction. General questions about their favorite streamers were asked to ease them into the conversation.

The interview followed a semi-structured format, covering several key topics derived from the main research questions. Table 1 outlines the key areas covered in the interviews. This list highlights the primary subjects explored to understand the participants' perceptions and interactions with streamers' personal branding. Depending on the responses, follow-up questions were asked to delve deeper into specific areas of interest or to clarify participants' perspectives. During the interviews, notes were taken to capture immediate impressions, highlight key points, and noted any non-verbal cues or emotional tones that might not be fully conveyed through transcription alone.

**Table 1***Interview Topic List*

Main Topic	Sub Topic
Favourite streamer description	Favourite streamer description Personal branding elements Types of interaction
Financial behaviour	Perception of recommendations Advertisements and promotions Financial support
Social norms and behaviour	Perception of trends Behavioral changes Community and culture
Life goals and aspirations	Perception of inspiration and motivation Career and hobbies Personal development
Personal branding	Perception of branding strategies Branding and engagement/interaction

## Data Analysis

In order to analyze the observations, a table was developed for each streamer and live stream, which will be described in the subsequent section. First, after observing the live streams, it was analyzed how the streamer had organized his streaming channel. This involved analyzing what the streamer offered on his channel, such as donation buttons, subscribe buttons, links to social media channels, merchandise, sponsorships, partnerships and any other notable appearances. Additionally, how the streamer offered this to his audience was examined, especially how the streamer wanted to ensure that his audience clicked on these buttons and explored his channel. Secondly, various categories of streaming content were distinguished. Including gameplay, Q&A sessions, promotional material, personal narratives, educational lessons, and other relevant aspects.

Third, the engagement metrics were analyzed, covering the following information: total number of comments during the live-stream, number of viewers at the beginning and the end of the stream. Fourth, any noteworthy remarks or interactions resulting from particular occurrences in the stream were noted. This included identifying why viewers reacted and to what. A distinction was made between reaction to in-game events, personal stories, or other events that provoked reaction.

Fifth, the streamer's responses to audience comments were analyzed to assess the degree of interaction. The degree and type of audience interaction were stated with notes of whether participation was positive, negative, or neutral. The streamer's communication with the audience was also examined. This included how the streamer communicated with its chat and how often this occurred. The tone of each stream was classified as informational, persuasive, entertaining, or personal, with examples or phrases presented to demonstrate the tone.

Sixth, recurrent themes were identified and documented, with an emphasis on personal branding, development, spending behavior on live-stream platforms, values, and aspirations. The manner in which these themes were introduced, the nature of audience interaction, and any modifications in the streamer's conduct were additionally studied. Finally, the behavior and presentation manner of the streamer, including the use of any special effects or overlays, as well as the visual presentation and set up, were described.

The data analysis utilized a thematic analysis approach in conjunction with coding, following Braun and Clarke's (2013) method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data. This systematic approach allowed for the perception of personal branding techniques used by streamers. The coding process utilized open coding, where data was examined line-by-line to generate initial codes without pre-defined categories (Brailas et al., 2023). Important themes emerged directly from the data by employing this inductive approach (Douine et al., 2021). Following initial coding, related codes were grouped into broader themes. The data from the live-stream observations and the interviews were then integrated. Themes identified from live-stream observations were compared and contrasted with those from participant interviews.

# Results

The objective of this study was to explore how young men perceive the personal branding strategies of prominent streamers on live streaming platforms. The results, based on both observations of streamers and interviews with viewers, revealed several interrelated themes. First, how young men perceive personal branding and what the main motivations are to engage and follow a streamer will be explored. Second, how young men interpret their favorite streamers' branding strategies through the lens of the live streaming environment, where platform dynamics play a role, will be outlined. These perceptions frequently cause viewers to establish a personal bond with the streamer. Third, in what form and what the main motivations are to financially contribute will be described. Fourth, how social norms and beliefs relate to how these branding initiatives are seen, and therefore add another level of engagement, will be explored. Lastly, how these branding techniques also interact with the life objectives and aspirations of young men, since many of them perceive the streamers as role models, will be outlined.

## Perception of Branding

This section addresses sub-question 1, by exploring how the personal branding of the participants' favourite streamers are perceived. Participants indicated several ways in which streamers engage their audience with personal branding. Many streamers partner up with influencers or celebrities to increase their reach and visibility, therefore drawing more viewers. Some mostly rely on their gaming ability to keep their audience interested. Viewers also tended to stick around longer when streamers came across as genuine and easy to relate to. Finally, participants mentioned that streamers need to find a good balance between promoting aspects like donations or merchandise and keeping personal interactions with their audience authentic.



## *Authenticity*

A frequently recurring theme from the interviews is the emphasis on authenticity in a streamer's personal branding. Ten out of twelve participants emphasized how important it is for a streamer to come across as genuine. As participant one shared:

*I think his personal branding really stands out because he's genuinely himself. He's just real, and he's a natural guy. He's an open book about himself and his private life. I mean, he's now going to the Black Market in Beverwijk with his mom. He doesn't have any hidden agendas. And yeah, that's what makes him unique (P. 1, following Serpent, 22 years old).*

In addition, several participants believed that streamers who share personal stories about family or health issues are seen as more approachable and real. This openness fosters a deeper connection, as they perceive the streamer as a relatable individual rather than a distant celebrity. As participant two believed:

*I think he's very transparent with his audience But it's just that he's honest about what he thinks and feels. Recently, for example, he talked about a melanoma that was found on his body. Yeah, he's open about that and can be honest with his audience. So I think that's a good thing (P.2, following Ninja, 23 years old).*

Participant seven expressed a similar view:

*I prefer it when I get the feeling that the person could be a friend, neighbor, or classmate. Someone who stays down-to-earth and can just show their own emotions. That's what appeals to me the most [...]. Everything has to be fast and exciting, and there can't be a moment of boredom, or people will stop watching (P. 7, following Serpent 21 years old).*

Viewers appreciate streamers who are not afraid to admit mistakes or change opinions, where viewers seeing this as a sign of being grounded and trustworthy. This openness

made the streamer feel more relatable and genuine, fostering a stronger connection with the audience.

On the other hand, this can also be interpreted as a deliberate choice to present himself this way, because streamers know that many viewers appreciate it. As participant seven shared:

*I think he also enjoys coming across as that 'regular guy,' and that's probably partly intentional. So, besides being the 'normal guy,' he also wants to be a bit quirky and stand out.[...] For example, today he was walking around the supermarket in a full train conductor's outfit. That kind of thing is part of his personal branding*  
*(P. 7, following Serpent, 21 years old).*

This shows that viewers can also realize that streamers deliberately do very ordinary things, like grocery shopping or going to a market with their mother. For some viewers, this can feel inauthentic, as it may be seen as acting in order to portray the 'regular guy' image. In this case, Serpent knows that his viewers enjoy this, as expressed by participant seven.

The interviews emphasize that authenticity, whether through open communication, streamer awareness, or personal stories, plays an important role in how streamers are perceived by their audience. Streamers who are seen as real and true to themselves could be able to build stronger connections with their audience, according to several interviewees.

### ***Commercial Approach***

Participants consistently expressed that some streamers prioritize marketing and commercialism, while others prioritized creating a more personalized experience during the live-streams. As participant one shared: *“If you compare him to someone else well-known, like Enzoknol, who also does livestreams sometimes... Yeah, there's a lot more advertising woven into it, you know, like clothing, shirts, and what you'd call his merchandise”* (P. 1, following Serpent, 22 years old). In contrast, his favorite streamer did not push donations or

merchandise too heavily on live-streams or social media, which made the connection with the audience feel more personal. Participant two confirmed this:

*He's probably not as commercial as the rest. So yeah, it really depends on the person. Some streamers, of course, let a few euros slip into their hands to say something on the live stream. I don't think he's like that (P. 2, following Ninja, 23 years old).*

However, the emphasis was on interacting with the audience, which resulted in a more interactive experience that was less concerned with money. Participant seven also shared that “A lot of streamers would milk that for all it's worth, really wanting someone to empty their savings account. But with Serpent you can tell he gets a bit uncomfortable with it. I always appreciate that” (P. 7, following Serpent, 21 years old). This more restrained, less commercial approach was perceived as a more positive experience.

From the observations, it was clear that streamers frequently use social media promotion as part of their branding. Almost all streamers, place noticeable buttons on their streaming page linking to Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. These symbols were frequently observed and contribute to the promotion of their brand on other platforms, thereby expanding their reach. This lack of attention may be due to the symbols blending into the busy nature of live-streams. In less busy streams, they remain visible for longer, but even then, participants reported paying little to no attention to them.

### ***Collaborative Branding***

Both the observations and interviews revealed that streamers often collaborate with celebrities or other influencers to expand their reach and visibility, which in turn enhances their personal branding. Streamers like Adin Ross, as believed by participant five, are heavily reliant on collaborations with celebrities and influencers, such as MMA fighters, NFL team owners, and YouTubers:

*Adin Ross primarily relies on collaborations. For example, if someone joins his stream and says something useful or shares something that wasn't known before (an exclusive), Adin Ross quickly becomes involved with all the news outlets reporting on him or that stream,[...]. And, of course, everyone is tuned in for that. So I believe that his growth is largely driven by other celebrities who also involve him in their own content (P. 5, following Adin Ross, 22 years old).*

By featuring other celebrities in their content, streamers can reach new audiences and grow their fanbase. It is an easy and effective way to expand their reach.

These partnerships increase the visibility of streamers and distinguish them from smaller content creators who lack access to such high-profile networks. Adin Ross' live-stream with Tory Lanez (American celebrity) from prison, which was also mentioned by participant five, was an excellent illustration of how his brand gained momentum and received substantial media attention:

*... his stream with an American artist who was still incarcerated,[...]. It went viral because of his conversation from his cell. [...] it's not just about the session with that artist, but also about Adin Ross. Every news outlet jumps on it, and the name Adin Ross only grows bigger (P. 5, following Adin Ross, 22 years old).*

The observations further confirm this strategy, showing that these collaborations not only increase visibility but also generate excitement and, at times, controversy. This helps engage both the streamer's audience and the fans of their guests. Streamers like Ninja utilize similar tactics, such as promoting their podcasts during live-streams, featuring celebrity guests, to appeal to a wider audience and reinforce their personal brand.

## *Skill-Based Branding*

Participants in the interviews pointed out that streamers like Ninja and DonKaaklijn have built their reputation largely on their impressive abilities in various competitive games. As participant two explained: *“When you think of Ninja, pretty much everyone around my age who games thinks of the streamer. He’s obviously very skilled at the games he played and still plays, so that’s how he made a name for himself”* (P. 2, following Ninja, 23 years old).

Participant ten supported this view, adding: *“..he can really play that game well, so that also contributes to his branding”* (P. 10, following DonKaaklijn, 20 years old).

Ninja's tournament victories have distinguished him in the gaming industry, as shared by participant two: *“So, he's definitely a big name in the gaming world, so to speak”* (P.2, following Ninja, 23 years old). These accomplishment and skills draw in viewers and fans who not only enjoy his performances but also seek to learn from his expertise. In a comparable situation, TimTheTatman is recognized for his exceptional Call of Duty skills, which captivate viewers who are eager to enhance their own gameplay. As believed by participant six: *“He’s also just a great Call of Duty player, so by watching him, you can become a better player yourself”* (P. 6, following TimTheTatman, 23 years old).

It is evident from the observations that streamers frequently exhibit their gaming capabilities in order to grow their brand and captivate their audience. The moderators of Ninja frequently present viewers with information regarding his gaming setup in order satisfy their curiosity, as his emphasis on high-level gameplay is highly fascinating. As observed, Ninja’s gaming talent appeared to generate enthusiasm and maintain the interest of the audience members who were interviewed. Similarly, DonKaaklijn frequently underscores his statistical data and expertise, leveraging his abilities to strengthen his status as a top-tier player. In the case of Symfuhny, his strategy of gathering winning streaks generates excitement and that might directly influence the growth of his fan base, subscriptions, and donations. His method

relies on the generation of enthusiasm through skillful performance, which in turn fosters viewer engagement and financial support without explicitly seeking it.

Overall, Serpent is perceived as a genuine and relatable personality. Interviewees compare him to a friend. He always wants to ensure his viewers are enjoying themselves, and therefore, he is highly focused on interaction. Milan Knol is also perceived as genuine and focused on interaction. DonKaaklijn is seen as genuine, open, and highly skill-based. Even though TimTheTatman, as a large streamer, focuses a lot on sponsorships and partnerships, he is still seen as genuine and interactive. He makes an effort to respond to his viewers when he has the time during the streams, which is quite impressive for a streamer of his size. Additionally, he tries to make time for collaborative streams with other well-known individuals. Ninja is perceived as very genuine despite his wealth, but he is also considered highly commercial. What stands out about Ninja is his gaming expertise, which entertains a large audience. Adin Ross is perceived as too commercial and reliant on collaborations. There is a lot of negativity surrounding his name and streams. The most value is therefore placed on personal branding that is authentic and relatable. A more personalized experience is preferred over a too commercial approach. Additionally, skill-based branding and collaborative partnerships are also important aspects of personal branding. The next section will discuss the participants' motivations for following and engaging with streamers.

## Engagement and Following Motivation

The following section addresses sub-question 1, by presenting the motivations interviewees shared for engaging with and following streamers. Interaction and engagement are important elements of personal branding, shaping how streamers connect with their audience. Participants described a personal connection that develops between viewers and streamers through regular interaction. Many viewers follow streamers only for pleasure, therefore entertainment was also an important factor in their motivation. A different attribute that emerged was a sense of community and emotional support; some viewers relied on streamers or the online community for emotional release or a sense of belonging under personal circumstances that were challenging. Lastly, often emphasized were the streamer's distinct personality traits since these stimulate interest and keep the audience engaged.

### *Streamer Interaction*

Participants consistently emphasized that the personal connection and interaction they encounter during streams is what mainly attracts them and maintains their interest. Several participants expressed their belief that streamers frequently respond to nearly all comments, which fosters a sense of inclusion and strengthens viewers' connection to the stream. In addition, participant three shared:

*He always has really good interaction with the chat. He sees everything in the chat and tries to engage with almost everything, responding to nearly everyone. Other streamers do that much less. So, I think that's the most enjoyable part for the viewer, especially when you get mentioned or acknowledged in some way (P. 3, following Serpent, 16 years old).*

Key elements that contribute to the interactive nature of the experience were also identified by several interviewees, such as Text-to-Speech (TTS), which reads the messages of viewers out loud. Participant one expressed: “...that triggers a TTS. The streamer hears it, and that

*creates a fun interaction for the viewers. In a way, you're buying a sort of connection or conversation through that feature” (P. 1, following Serpent 22 years old).* As stated, streamers can frequently respond to amusing TTS messages, improving the personalization and enjoyment of the experience.

From my observations, it seems to be that streamers implement interaction as a fundamental component of their branding strategy. For example, Serpent engages in discussions regarding his ‘subathon’ earnings. A ‘subathon’ is a unique kind of live-stream event which the stream's duration increases each time an audience member subscribes to the streamer's channel, therefore promoting continuous spectator involvement and increasing interaction. Symfuhny and TimTheTatMan employ personal topics, such as discussing their wealth, to provoke reactions and sustain engagement in the live-stream chat.

Nevertheless, certain participants observed that streamers may be selective in their responses. As participant one believed:

*.. he notices all the icons next to someone's name, like a diamond or a face. [...] If you're new in the chat and don't have anything next to your name, he can spot that.*

*On the other hand, if someone is a VIP or moderator, the streamer tends to read those messages a bit faster (P. 1, following Serpent, 22 years old).*

Interaction is not just a bonus, it is the key factor that drives viewers' loyalty to certain streamers. Participants emphasized that personal interactions, whether it be having their name mentioned or a question answered, make the streaming experience more engaging and dynamic. Participant seven expressed: *“The very first time I watched him and reacted during a livestream, I thought, “Wow, this guy, with 500 viewers”—he had slightly fewer viewers back then—is responding to my message.” That was quite a surprise” (P. 7, following Serpent, 21 years old).* Similarly, participant eight shared the same feeling: *“I remember thinking, “Wow,*



*he's actually responding to my comment," and you get this kind of thrill, like, "Oh, he's talking about me" (P. 8, following Serpent, 23 years old).*

This shows that viewers can be deeply impressed by interaction with their favorite streamer. It can leave a lasting impression, making it an important aspect of a streamer's personal branding.

This sense of personalization is also evident in the observations, as streamers employ audio and visual branding to strengthen their personal image as genuine. DonKaaklijn, for instance, affects his streams with a playful, unique atmosphere by incorporating humorous sound effects and animations during situations when viewers donate or subscribe. This gives them a sort of good introduction to the streamer and ensures that new followers immediately experience a sense of recognition.

As additionally observed, not all streamers demonstrate the same level of interaction with their audiences. A more distant experience is created by relatively larger streamers, who tend to interact less with their audience, as some participants noted. Participant four felt that the stream's attraction decreases when streamers fail to interact directly with viewers, which results in a less personal experience. In contrast, viewers who experience a sense of recognition, from the streamer, are more inclined to maintain their loyalty and even financially contribute, such as donations or subscriptions, in order to encourage additional engagement. The majority of the participants are also willing to pay for the interaction with their favourite streamer; this will be further elaborated upon in the financial contributions section.

## *Entertainment*

Entertainment is also an important factor that motivates viewers to engage with and follow streamers, in addition to interaction. Participants frequently shared that they primarily watch streams for the enjoyment they derive from the content made by the streamers.

Participant six mentioned:

*.. he also creates gambling content, which I also enjoy watching. I like to take a gamble myself, but playing with your own money isn't really wise. So, I get enough satisfaction from watching others gamble. That way, I take no risks but still enjoy the thrill of watching, so to speak (P. 6, following TimTheTatman, 23 years old).*

This quote is emphasizing the entertainment aspect without the personal financial risk.

Participant one added *“There used to be an option on Twitch [...]. You could watch movies together through Amazon Prime. That created a fun vibe, you know, with the chat just messing around while everyone watched a movie together” (P. 1, following Serpent, 22 years old).*

This indicates that the motivation to follow a streamer can also stem from seeking entertainment for fun or to combat boredom. This can be an important part of a streamer's personal branding.

For others, streams provide background entertainment during ordinary tasks. This aspect is also believed by participant seven:

*You get a glimpse into someone else's life during moments when your own life might feel a bit dull [...]. It's fun to watch someone go to an amusement park, for example, and experience funny things. That way, you still get some entertainment while you're feeling bored (P. 7, following Serpent 21 years old).*

This suggests that the live, interactive nature of these streams ensure that viewers remain consistently engaged and amused, providing an escape from their normal lives and daily routines.

The entertainment value of streams is also improved by the incorporation of other streamers. The aspect of collaborative content is also previously mentioned as an important aspect of a streamer's personal branding. Participant ten shared: *“On Thursdays, it's really funny because he games with Milan Knol. Milan always chooses those simulation games, and they're often really quirky. I always find that pretty amusing”* (P. 10, following DonKaakLijn, 20 years old). This is also believed by participant five, who noticed that the content was more engaging by combining the personalities of streamers and influencers, which was a source of appeal.

The streamer's capacity to incorporate educational content into an entertaining format was also identified as an important feature, resulting in streams that was both informative and enjoyable. Participant three expressed:

*He has a lot of live streams with facts and such... and I enjoy saving those facts, for example, to share at a birthday party. A few of those facts, I find it really interesting to share that kind of information with other people.* (P. 3, following Serpent, 16 years old)

This combination of entertainment and education offers viewers a broader experience, guaranteeing that they could obtain more than just pleasure from the content.

### ***Community and Emotional Support***

The interviewees shared that community involvement is a key factor driving viewer engagement, loyalty, and motivation to follow certain streamers. Although each perspective focuses on different reasons why viewers feel connected, the online community remains central in shaping the streamer's personal brand. Or as participant one felt about streamers' communities: *“I think that's about feeling like you're part of a bigger family in a way”* (P. 1, following Serpent, 22 years old). The importance of emotional support and belonging within

the streamer's community and towards the streamer was frequently discussed during the interviews. Participant one believed that,

*...what he does is exactly what the people in that chat really enjoy seeing. Because often, they might be lonely people sitting in an attic[...], there are genuinely people in the chat talking about real-life problems. And then you see how the chat reacts with things like, "It'll be okay," or "Your relationship ended? That's tough," those kinds of things. [...] There are genuinely people in that chat who have nothing more than their screen, and yet they feel warm and even free to talk about their issues in that chat. It's kind of crazy, really. (P. 1, following Serpent, 22 years old)*

This sense of community not only offered support but also provides a sense of discipline during challenging times for viewers. Several participants witnessed that the consistent interaction between streamers and their viewers fostered a familiar, inviting atmosphere, which in turn reinforced the relationship between the streamer and its audience. Participant nine has a very special bond with the community and is unsure of what will happen if this community disappears:

*... If you're not feeling great one evening and you're looking for support or answers, you can often find that there. Especially because it's a part of your daily life, your passion, it becomes something you want to be part of and stay connected to. I do worry, though, that if it ever disappears, where you would go online for that. (P. 9, following Serpent, 22 years old).*

The streamer's constant maintenance and development of this encouraging atmosphere, not only strengthens the community, but also builds a strong personal brand for them. Presenting streamers as more than just entertainers but also genuine individuals who foster a sense of community and offering emotional support to those who need it in challenging times.

Participant eight shared a particularly personal experience regarding the emotional connection they felt with a streamer:

*I come from a difficult family situation myself; my father was partly out of the picture. And I know that Enzo Knol (the streamer) [...], had a similar situation[...]. He also grew up without a father, and at one point, he made a video where he shaved. I remember thinking, "Oh, that's useful, now I know how to do it." In fact, I learned how to shave from Enzo Knol (P. 8, following Serpent, 23 years old).*

This demonstrates how live-streamers can influence daily life and offer guidance, similar to a trusted figure in a parasocial relationship. This kind of personal interaction illustrates how a streamer's personal brand can extend beyond entertainment to become a source of life guidance and emotional connection for their audience. By addressing personal challenges that resonate with viewers, streamers can build a personal brand rooted in relatability and shared experiences.

### ***Streamer's Personality***

In the interviews, participants highlighted the importance of a streamer's personality as a key factor in why they choose to engage and continue following. Participant nine shared an anecdote about why he is so drawn Serpent's personality:

*I just think he's a really fun, intelligent guy, [...]. I know several famous Dutch people [...]. But I'm not interested in what they do, it's the person themselves that I find interesting. And with Serpent, he's just an incredibly intelligent guy, and the fact that he does this as well is just funny (P. 9, following Serpent, 22 years old).*

These characteristics separates streamers, providing viewers with a more profound connection that motivated them to return, in addition to commentary and gameplay.

The capacity to establish a personal connection with the streamer, as a result of the streamer's personality, was highly important for numerous participants. Participant three

believed: *“I also have ADHD and stuff like that, [...]. I kind of see myself in him”* (P. 3, following *Serpent, 16 years old*). Participant seven, as stated and quoted previously also valued the approachable, “neighbor-like” personality of their favorite streamer, describing them as relatable and down-to-earth. This personality trait and accessibility made it easier for viewers to feel involved and connected.

The personality of streamers like *Serpent* was especially mentioned by participants, who appreciated the energy and unpredictability that added excitement to the streams.

Participant six found: *“Well, like I said: his enthusiasm. He’s really funny* (P. 6, following *TimTheTatman, 23 years old*).” Similarly, participant eight also shared his thought on the personality traits of his favourite streamer:

*Well, he has this certain ease with which he talks about serious topics [...]. There are always good discussions and fun topics happening in his Twitch chat. I think that was the first thing that made me think, “Hey, whenever you turn on the stream, there’s always something going on.” I found that really cool.”* (P. 8, following *Serpent, 23 years old*).

This balance added depth to the content while keeping the tone light and entertaining, demonstrating how the streamer’s personality influenced the way content was delivered.

These results clearly show that streamer interaction is by far the main motivation for following and engaging with a streamer. Additionally, participants find community belonging very important, where emotional support is sought by participants going through difficult times. Another key motivation is the streamer's personality, with entertainment also frequently mentioned by participants. In the next section, the role of the live-stream platform and the dynamic aspects that can shape a streamer's personal branding will be delved into.

## Platform-Specific Features

The following section addresses sub-question 2, by exploring the role of platform-specific features in shaping the personal brand of their favourite streamer. Tools such as subscriptions, donations, and interactive elements help streamers build a stronger connection with their audience while enhancing their brand identity.

Bits on Twitch are an example of a platform-specific feature that is important to improving engagement. Bits are a virtual, platform specific currency, that viewers could buy and use to send animations or Text-to-Speech (TTS) messages during a live stream. These messages offer a personal touch by enabling viewers to communicate more freely and directly with live streamers. As participant one shared:

*The interaction is just funny, especially with the bits alert. He has a bit alert, and then you hear falling pipes or tubes. And if you do that for a cheer of 400 (donation), well, then you hear a huge bang. Someone edited that sound so that it's almost like ear rape (P. 1, following Serpent, 22 years old).*

Those platform specific features such as Bits not only provide entertainment for viewers but also serve as a revenue model for streamers and the live-streaming platform, thereby enabling them to develop and maintain their content. In order to further enhance their personal brand, streamers frequently personalize these tools by adding various sounds and notifications to make their streams stand out.

From my observations, it has become clear that many streamers use platform tools creatively to engage viewers. DonKaaklijn and Milan Knol use personalized messages triggered by donations or subscriptions to make viewers feel involved. These messages allow the streamer to acknowledge each contribution publicly, also reinforcing the sense of community. Twitch's point system also rewards viewers for longer watch times, allowing

them to redeem points which can be traded for specific streamer rewards. As participant seven believed:

*...with channel points, you can trigger an ad. You earn channel points just by watching the stream; you collect them as a viewer on that Twitch channel. With 30,000 channel points, you can roll an ad. It's kind of a trolling move towards the rest of the chat [...] everyone without a sub has to sit through the commercial (P. 7, following Serpent, 21 years old).*

This encourages longer engagement and provides a direct, interactive experience that strengthens the streamer's connection to their audience.

The well-known concept of raiding, as described in the theoretical framework, did not play much of a role in this study. During the observations, raiding only happened twice, both times during Roedie's stream, who is a relatively small streamer. None of the participants mentioned raiding during the interviews, even when asked about the most used and important platform dynamics. However, it remains an important tool for entertaining viewers and expanding a streamer's reach. This could suggest that raiding is more commonly used by smaller streamers, while larger streamers focus on other means of engaging and growing their audience. In contrast, TimTheTatman encouraged his audience to follow and support an unknown streamer who appeared during his live stream. This kind gesture brought a lot of positive emotions from the unknown streamer, who was extremely grateful for TimTheTatman's support.

Within the concept of financial collaborations and promotions, viewers are more expecting transparency in financial promotions, as participant seven, among others, has emphasized. Serpent, for example, is very transparent about his sponsorship agreements, disclosing information regarding its earnings and partnerships. This transparency fosters a sense of legitimacy, which in turn strengthens their brand by fostering trust with their



audience. However, in the observations, live-streamers such as Adin Ross occasionally receive criticism for excessively promoting sponsored products, which results in polarized comments from the audience. Although financial promotions are important for sustaining the live-stream, viewers may experience a sense of disconnection if the streamer appears overly obsessed with revenue generation from sponsors and partnerships. This is complemented by the beliefs of participant eight:

*Usually, YouTubers and streamers have to become more transparent, especially as they operate on a larger scale [...]. It's only logical that they want to make money and that it's their job, right? So, it's totally fine to tell people you're getting paid for something. (P. 8, following Serpent 23 years old)*

It is unclear from the interview where this pressure for better transparency originates. It seems to lean towards pressure from the viewers, as loyal followers experience the entire journey, from small to immense popularity, and therefore may expect transparency regarding sponsors or similar matters.

Streamers employ exclusivity and recognition as important components to establish more profound relations with their audience, and these qualities are further supported by platform-specific tools. As participant three believed:

*If you have a sub or subscriber badge next to your name, you get more involved in the stream by the streamer and the chat. There are also people who donate a lot of money to the streamer, and they might get a VIP badge or something like that (P. 3, following Serpent, 16 years old).*

Subscriber badges, personalized emotes, and VIP badges provide viewers with a sense of community involvement and status within that online community. Subscriber badges allow long-time supporters to stand out in the chat, signaling their loyalty to both the streamer and other viewers. Emotes, which are custom emojis unique to each streamer's channel, give

subscribers a way to express themselves within the community while reinforcing the streamer's branding.

In summary, these results show that participants place great value on certain elements of the live-stream platform, and that this can greatly shape how a personal brand is perceived by viewers. In the next section, the various financial contributions mentioned by participants will be discussed.

## Financial Contributions

This section addresses sub-question 3 by exploring how young men financially contribute to live-streamers. Just one of the twelve participants said that he never paid a streamer subscription or made a donation in any form. As participant five argues:

*... In the end, they all make enough money once they have such a large following. They naturally get all sorts of sponsorship deals and contracts [...], so they usually don't need donations. And luckily, I didn't fall for his Bitcoin stories either, so I haven't invested a cent myself (P. 5, following Adin Ross, 22 years old).*

This shows that viewers can also be highly skeptical about donating or subscribing. If a streamer is perceived as extremely wealthy and insincere, it can lead to aversion toward the streamer and feelings of distrust.

Eleven out of the twelve participants stated that they have directly donated to their favourite streamers. In the interviews, participants also displayed a range of donation behaviors. Participant one shared that: *"I think I'm at around €200 this month in total from all those donations"* (P. 1, following Serpent, 22 years old), whereas others, including participant two and participant eight, donated lesser amounts, often ranging from 5 to 20 euros. Participant three mentioned using Amazon Prime for occasional donations, and participant seven noted that while they do donate, they prioritize subscriptions as their primary means of

support. This variety in donation habits shows how personal connection and the streamer's content influence viewers' willingness to contribute financially. The observations indicated that streamers employ particular methods for asking for donations. Adin Ross and Milan Knol employ visually appealing donation buttons to informally promote contributions, whereas others, such as DonKaaklijn and Symfuhny, actively engage viewers by publicly acknowledging major donors during their live-streams. Showing the names of leading contributors on-screen and deploying personalized messages establishes a sense of acknowledgment that encourages viewers to donate, enhancing their connection to both the stream and the streamer. TimTheTatman employs a competitive method, regularly recognizing his top donors, which encourages viewers to increase their contributions in pursuit of comparable recognition.

During the interviews, participants expressed a particular dedication to their favourite streamers via direct subscriptions. Several interviewees are involved with regular subscription activities, with some preferring monthly payments and others preferring longer membership durations for economic reasons. For example, participant two subscribes monthly, whereas participant seven continues to use an occasional subscription over a period of three years, generally renewing it at major events or the introduction of new content. Additionally, participant seven mentions the following:

*... I've had periods where I was subscribed to him on Twitch. [...] it's about 4 euros per month. I've been doing that on and off for about three years. There have also been times when I wasn't subscribed for a few months because I just wasn't watching Twitch. Then I hear about something interesting, like a subathon, and I'll go ahead and get a sub again.*  
(P. 7, following Serpent, 21 years old)

Meanwhile, participant eight prefers six-month subscriptions, indicating that as a better value for money, and participant nine subscribes monthly while also supporting special events.

These patterns suggest that a personal connection and consistent content play an important role in encouraging long-term financial support from viewers. However, the extent of this support can vary depending on how deeply viewers relate to the streamer and the value they place on ongoing engagement.

The observations highlight how streamers actively promote subscriptions through a variety of strategies. By use of moderator comments and immediate hyperlinks to their social media accounts, Adin Ross and Serpent regularly promote subscriptions, therefore increasing visibility and connection. By highlighting new members with on-screen remarks, streamers like DonKaaklijn and Symfuhny customize the experience and create a more engaging environment and closer community connection. Furthermore, all observed streamers use Discord as another medium to interact with fans and subscribers, providing both free and paid channels with exclusive material, therefore fostering loyalty and motivating longer-term financial support. This strategic use of Discord and other platform features enables streamers to monetize their content effectively while strengthening their personal brand.

The interviews and observations reveal additional approaches, besides donating and subscribing, to monetization and viewer contributions, especially when it comes to the concept of gifted subscriptions and how streamers drive financial support. The interviews revealed that certain participants, including participant nine, felt strongly about this aspect.

*Sometimes, [...], I give random donations. You can also gift someone else a subscription, which is called a 'gifted sub.' I do all this partly for the status (it looks good for the stats) and to support both the viewer and the streamer (P. 9, following Serpent, 22 years old).*

Participant ten indicated “...sometimes I give ten gifted subs or so, but I don't do that very often, especially now that the prices have gone up”(P. 10, following DonKaaklijn, 20 years old). This method of 'giving' enables subscribers to indirectly contribute while improving the

shared experience for others. The observations indicated that streamers implement several monetization strategies to optimize revenue and engagement. For instance, Roedie employs a more proactive strategy by allowing friends to take control of his stream to stimulate donations. These friends he played with were also streamers, so they knew a lot about live-stream dynamics. When Roedie was off-screen, his friends went all out asking for donations and subscriptions, pushing with questions like: as "*who has the biggest wallet?*" While I observed that this approach had a clear impact on many younger viewers, I was personally shocked by it. In my view, this was a strategy aimed at quickly generating a large number of donations. Some viewers even commented that they had already donated a lot and did not want to continue. Without any regard for the young viewers and their financial situation, the push for donations continued shamelessly. In fact, Roedie had apparently suffered a serious injury, and his friends used this as an argument to pressure viewers into donating money.

In summary, these results show that nearly all participants have made some form of financial contribution to their favourite streamer. Donations, subscriptions, and gifted subs are the most commonly mentioned forms of financial contribution. The next section will discuss the motivations for making a financial contribution.

### ***Financial Contribution Motivations***

The following section addresses sub-question 3, by exploring the motivations behind financial contributions. One of the main reasons participants paid for their contributions was the chance for personal interaction with the streamer and acknowledgment. Many of the interviewees value the recognition they get, allowing them to become more involved and supportive of the stream. Participant one believed that, "*That's for the interaction. You're basically paying for the interaction (P. 1, following Serpent, 22 years old)*". Where participant two shared the same view, "*You do it, of course, partly to be noticed, and if you do it multiple*

*times, maybe they'll remember your name. [...] you want to feel a bit appreciated” (P. 2, following Ninja, 23 years old).* On the other hand, participant three argued: *“The people who spend a lot of money on streamers really seem to love the attention they get from their donations. [...], I think you shouldn't have to buy attention; it's something you should just receive naturally” (P. 3, following Serpent, 16 years old).* Several participants also pointed out that smaller streamers usually provide more direct interaction, which makes donating more fulfilling. Participant three also mentioned that: *“If people get very little attention or just don't have many friends, I can understand why they do it. But on the other hand, I also don't really get it” (P. 3, following Serpent, 16 years old).* This illustrates that individuals with fewer social relationships in real life often find motivation to make financial contributions because the attention they receive from streamers and the community helps them feel more connected and valued.

Some participants described how the dynamics of the chat and pressure from the community can influence their decision to donate. The desire to fit in and participate in trends, such as joining in on ‘hype trains,’ is a frequent motivator for donations. Seeing other viewers donate or watching streamers respond positively to donations can create a sense of social pressure to follow suit. As participant one felt: *“You do have a certain status in that chat, [...]. Sometimes you get caught up in it when someone else starts, and then you think, yeah... I want to join in as well” (P. 1, following Serpent, 22 years old).* This usually results in increased involvement and a feeling of responsibility toward the community. Participating in special events like ‘subathons’ also provides status and recognition, which might inspire more urgency to donate. As also participant seven felt:

*During the subathon I watched, there was no cap. That was eventually the day the subathon ended. That ten euros I donated was really just to help out a bit, like: Okay,*

*guys, let's get the time back up so we can have longer content (P. 7, following Serpent, 21 years old).*

This can be seen as indirect pressure from the community, encouraging those who have money and are willing to spend it to contribute in order to keep the stream going longer. Other viewers, who have not donated or contributed, can also benefit from this.

The removal of ads by Twitch is another important incentive for financial contributions; especially for subscriptions. Many participants mentioned that the advertising on Twitch may be somewhat disruptive. Participant seven argued *“When they roll an ad, sometimes, you get up to 11 in a row[...]. It really feels like you're stuck in a commercial break.[...], so paying 4 euros a month is totally worth it for me” (P. 7, following Serpent, 21 years old).*

As several participants stated, for a better viewing experience, paying about four euros per month to skip commercials is definitely well worth it.

Another main reason, for financial contribution, mentioned by participants during the interviews were platform-specific features. Frequent subscription or donation benefits include access to unique chat features such as badges, emotes, and special stickers that enhance their presence and visibility in the community and in the chat during the live-stream. Having a subscriber or VIP badge made certain interviewees feel more involved and recognized, from the streamer's perspective as well as other viewers. As participant nine expressed, *“I'm a monthly subscriber, paying €3.99 per month for special stickers/emotes and a badge next to my name” (P. 9, following Serpent, 22 years old).* These features enable viewers to stand out and establish more personal connection with the streamer and community. Therefore improving the overall experience and make it feel rewarding. Exclusive access to new emotes and the ability to gift VIP badges to others were also values perks, as stated by some participants.

Finally, numerous participants said that they wanted to spend money on the streamer to support them as a primary motivation for their financial contributions. Usually, this support results from an appreciation of the content and the good influence the streamer has on the participants' life. Participant two pointed out that *“I appreciated that he helped me get through the boredom a bit”* (P. 2, following Ninja, 23 years old). Participant four expressed that, *“For me, it's really more about the gesture and the feeling that I'm contributing to something I find important. And also to show: Tim, keep doing what you're doing”* (P. 4, following TimTheTatman, 23 years old). This shows that viewers also want to financially support the streamer to ensure they can continue. It demonstrates that streamers have a certain positive impact on the lives of their viewers.

In summary, these results show that interaction with the streamer is again the main motivation for donating to streamers. Participants frequently emphasized that they highly value the recognition, through interaction, that they receive from streamers by donating. While a community has many benefits, the motivation to donate is also fueled by the community. Several participants experienced pressure from the community to donate to streamers. Supporting the streamer is also often mentioned as a motivation to donate, to show that they are doing well and should continue creating this content. For financial contributions in the form of subscriptions, the removal of ads is the main motivation. Additionally, platform features such as badges and stickers are mentioned in relation to subscriptions. In the next section, the social norms and values in relation to the perceived personal branding of streamers will be explored.



## Socials Norms and Values

The following section addresses sub-question 4, by exploring the social norms and values in relation to the personal branding of their favourite streamer. Participants in the interviews frequently noted the disconnect between the image streamers try to present and how they actually behave. For instance, participant seven pointed out inconsistencies in how one streamer presented himself:

*I feel like he contradicts himself quite often, so I wouldn't be quick to take a message from him seriously. For example, recently he started talking about vegetarianism, but by now he's eaten meat on stream at least eight times. [...] don't tell me it's bad and hypocritical to eat meat while you're doing it yourself (P. 7, following Serpent, 21 years old).*

Participants were left feeling skeptical about their favourite streamer's genuine beliefs as a result of this example of inconsistency, particularly in regard to values such as beliefs about politics or dietary choices.

Although these obstacles exist, certain streamers are capable of formulating a message that relates favorably with their audiences. For instance, TimTheTatman, as indicated by both interviews and observations, employs his personal success stories, which involves his transition from a struggling content creator to a successful streamer, to motivate his audience. Viewers, and interviewees who consider him as a positive role model may find resonance in his portrayal of determination and values. This is for example expressed by participant four: *“TimTheTatMan profiles and positions himself through his authenticity and humor, [...]. He's truly someone who always stays true to himself, and I think that really resonates with who I am” (P. 4, following TimTheTatman, 23 years old).*

Of the twelve participants, four described how streamers had a positive impact on their personal development, particularly in terms of shaping their values and norms. Participant one shared:

*He wanted to quit smoking. [...] I was up late watching his stream, and it kind of felt like having that little conversation about quitting. The next day, I actually thought about it and decided to call my doctor and say, "I want to quit smoking." (P. 1, following Serpent, 22 years old).*

Additionally, after witnessing a streamer's dedication to fitness, even with their own hectic schedule, participant six was inspired to keep up a healthy lifestyle:

*... he goes to the gym a lot. [...] He really motivated me to, despite having a busy life and commitments, keep working out and stay fit. Even if you're sitting behind a computer for 6, 7, 8 hours a day, if you make time to keep exercising, you can stay fit and healthy (P. 6, following TimTheTatman, 23 years old).*

The participants' values of self-improvement and health were reflected in the actions of the streamers in both situations. Participant three added “*Well, he’s always about being yourself. [...] So, I think that’s one of the things he really emphasizes: just be yourself, don’t care about the rest, and do what you want*” (P. 3, following Serpent, 16 years old).

In addition to health-related objectives, certain participants were motivated by authenticity and self-expression. For instance, participant three believed that

*In my own opinion, I’m quite open. [...] but I think that if I had never watched him, I wouldn’t have been as open as I am now, and I wouldn’t have allowed or shared as much as I do now (P. 3, following Serpent, 16 years old).*

Furthermore, participant four was inspired by a streamer's constant commitment to self-improvement, which motivated the participant to adopt comparable values, including embracing new interests and pursuing career goals. This will be the main topic of the

upcoming subsection, which will address life objectives and aspirations. In this manner, participants mentioned feeling inspired by the streamers' efforts toward self-improvement, which motivated them to pursue personal growth in their lives.

Streamers also had a positive effect, as perceived by participants, by encouraging critical thinking. Participant six reflected on how watching streamers influenced his gambling habits, sharing how a streamer's message helped him gain perspective. He explained:

*He definitely made me gamble less. [...] I've also seen plenty of people around me who had to do it every day and lost a lot of money. By watching him and listening to his messages and words, I realized not to go overboard and to gamble in moderation (P. 6, following TimTheTatman, 23 years old).*

Another participant became more critical of media and promotions after witnessing a streamer's questionable product endorsements, prompting them to scrutinize such content more carefully. Both cases show how the influence of streamers, even when highlighting negative behaviors, contributed to participants' awareness and discernment regarding potentially harmful activities.

For two of the participants, the influence of streamers was more negative, particularly regarding financial decisions and lifestyle choices. Participant five believe that *"I always stay critical and don't easily fall for such stories or streams, [...] at some point, when streamers have a large reach, they start promoting or pushing certain products. I always stay critical of that"* (P. 5, following Adin Ross, 22 years old).

Four of the twelve participants initially reported that streamers had little to no impact on their personal norms or values. Participant two expressed uncertainty about whether streamers had any real effect on their daily lives, and participant five stated that although they explored new topics or interests because of streamers, their core principles remained unchanged. The participants argued that their basic principles and values stayed the same even

though they appreciated the content and noted several small influencing situations. This represents a portion of participants who see streamers as entertainers instead of someone influencing their social or personal values.

In summary, these results show that viewers are often skeptical about the genuine beliefs of the streamer. When viewers feel that a streamer has a certain disconnect between how they try to present themselves and how they truly come across, it can create a sense of aversion, making the streamer seem untrustworthy. While several participants mentioned that the streamer had no influence on their norms and values, others said that they did. Streamers had a positive influence on some participants regarding smoking, exercising, and gambling. It is also important to note that the opposite of financial advice was sometimes displayed. This was viewed subjectively, and participants made their own judgments. Streamers also had a positive influence on concepts and personality traits they projected, such as self-improvement, authenticity, and self-expression. In the next and final section, the life objectives and aspirations of young men in relation to the personal branding of streamers will be explored.

## **Life Objectives and Aspirations**

This last section addresses sub-question 5, by exploring how the participants' own life objectives and aspirations relate to the personal branding of their favourite streamer. Several participants reported during the interviews that streamers did not directly affect their personal ambitions. However, several interviewees felt that their views overlapped and that it was one of the reasons that they started following the streamer and watching their live streams.

Participant one admired the bravery of their favorite streamer but did not feel inspired to set new personal goals based on the streamer's lifestyle. Similarly, participant six stated that their ambitions, particularly regarding streaming or gaming, remained unchanged. Participant seven also reflected on his evolving ambitions while watching his favourite streamer:

*If any ambitions have come from this, it's that I think it would be fun to be a streamer and eventually make a decent living from it. But realistically, I know it's probably not the right path for me (P. 7, following Serpent, 21 years old).*

Although these interviewees acknowledged the achievement of streamers, they maintained a clear difference between their own aspirations and those of the streamers they frequently followed.

Although some participants indicated that their favourite streamers had no noticeable impact on their life objectives, other participants mentioned that streamers shaped their interests and hobbies. One of the streamers with whom participant three interacted, shared comparable career objectives, such as becoming a teacher: “[...] I can somewhat relate to him because he also wants to become a teacher, and I'm about to start a teacher training program, so I can see myself in him.” (P. 3, following TimTheTatman, 16 years old). Participant eight reported that watching a streamer inspired the participant to pursue other interests: “I'm currently following quite a few storm chasers in America who hunt tornadoes, and I thought it would be really fun to try something like that on Twitch. Like, doing a livestream while I'm chasing thunderstorms, so to speak” (P. 3, following Serpent, 16 years old). Likewise, participant eight discussed how discovering early YouTube content providers inspired the participant's own passion for video production and content creation.

For several participants, streamers presented valuable life lessons. Four of the twelve interviewees related experiences of being motivated by the streamers' rise from humble beginnings to the popularity and success of a streamer. Such as the admiration of participant two for a streamer's journey:

*I think that's kind of the lesson, [...]. In the end, he's just a regular guy from America who suddenly became really big. So I think the lesson is that with hard work and chasing your dreams, you can always achieve something, no matter what it is*

*(P. 2, following Ninja, 23 years old).*

Participant five also believed that: *“I'm also an ambitious person, [...] when you look at someone who has already achieved something, it's always a motivation to stay ambitious yourself, even if it's in a different direction” (P. 5, following Adin Ross, 22 years old).*

TimTheTatman, a popular streamer who frequently discusses his struggles prior to his success, is an excellent illustration of this topic in the observations. Encouraging his audience to follow their aspirations and not give up, he describes his path from a small-time content creator to a major, and powerful influencer. But not all viewers are motivated by these examples; some viewers find these success tales unrelated to their own reality.

Interviewees frequently commented on the perceived luxury and wealth of streamers, with varying responses. Participant four found that, *“He really focuses on getting donations, emphasizes how much money he has, and shows off the luxury he lives in, with everything he buys and orders, [...]” (P. 4, following TimTheTatman, 23 years old).* Participant nine, on the other hand, valued the realistic approach of his favourite streamer:

*He's very neutral and realistic about success, and I think that's been really good for me. His biggest success has unfortunately gone to his head a bit, and he has become more arrogant because of it. But despite that, [...]. He doesn't flaunt his status at all. You notice that his wealth fades into the background, unlike Gio Latooy or Don de Jong. He doesn't chase status and just remains his authentic self (P. 9, following Serpent, 22 years old).*

These situations proved to be apparent in the observations, particularly with streamers like Adin Ross who routinely highlights his riches via discussions regarding costly purchases like golden necklaces. TimTheTatman also regularly talks about his planned boat purchases and his McLaren Demon, therefore generating interaction by highlighting his wealth and success. These conversations, however, sometimes cause conflicting responses among

viewers; some find these displays of riches excessive or unappealing while others appreciate the achievement and aspire to reach similar objectives and dreams.

In summary, these results show that nearly all participants said that streamers had no direct influence on their life objectives and aspirations. However, where the streamers did have an influence was on hobbies and interests. By watching the streamers, participants developed new interests and pursued new hobbies. Streamers also presented valuable life lessons that viewers appreciated, such as portraying an energetic young person who grew into a huge celebrity.

## **Discussion**

The discussion focuses on authenticity, relatability, and interaction as key elements in understanding how young men perceive personal branding and engage with streamers. After connecting these findings to relevant theories like the two-step flow of information and parasocial interaction, the practical implications for streamers, brands, and marketers will be discussed, followed by the study's limitations, future research directions, and conclusion.

### **Main Findings**

This study identified four main findings. First, authenticity was identified as an essential component of personal branding, particularly in the manner in which streamers communicate with their audiences. While this aligns with previous research showing that authenticity can make parasocial relationships feel more real and immediate (Kneisel & Sternadori, 2023), it is important to remember that these are separate concepts. The role of authenticity in personal branding and parasocial relationships might work differently. In contrast, the focus on authenticity stands apart from traditional views on role models. Typically, role models are valued for showing the steps to success and offering a clear

roadmap for achieving it (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). In this study, young viewers gave relatability and authenticity higher importance than their pursuit of achievement. Some participants felt that streamers who concentrated on financial gain or flaunting riches created a distance, implying that authenticity and relatability were of greater importance to establishing trust and participation. Several participants indicated that, unlike traditional role models, streamers that give emotional connection and transparency priority over highlighting success seem to relate more to younger viewers. Which in turn encourages long-term loyalty and financial support.

Secondly, the interaction between streamers and their viewers stood out as a key factor in keeping audiences engaged. It is often the main reason people choose to follow a streamer and contribute financially. This is consistent with findings by Xu et al. (2023), who highlight that interaction is critical for financial support, and with research by McLaughlin & Wohn (2021), which emphasizes the importance of real-time communication in creating a sense of closeness between viewers and streamers. Personalized engagement, like responding to comments or acknowledging donations, does more than just build a connection, it also strengthens the streamer's personal brand. Participants felt that, streamers who focus on direct interaction tend to create stronger bonds with their audience, improving how they are perceived. This type of communication makes viewers feel appreciated, motivating them to engage more and offer financial support, which in turn boosts both viewer loyalty and the streamer's brand identity.

Third, the personality of the streamer is central to both viewer loyalty and engagement, and the participants indicated that this shapes the decision to follow a streamer. This emphasis on personality impacts the streamer's personal branding. Additionally, the streamer's personality is highly important in terms of social norms and values, with viewers seeking similarities between themselves and the streamer, such as self-expression and self-



improvement. This is in line with Hilvert-Bruce et al. (2018), who stressed the importance of personality. However, their study also pointed out that technical skills matter, while this research shows that the platform's dynamics are even more important for boosting personal branding through interaction. Furthermore, Giertz et al. (2022) agree that viewers are motivated to financially support streamers due to the desire to connect with and support them personally. This also corresponds with Amani (2024), who found that brand legitimacy is reinforced when there is an alignment between socially desired values and the streamer's behavior, echoing the importance of perceived integrity and shared values. This suggests that a streamer's personal branding is strengthened not only by their personality traits but also by the perceived alignment of those traits with the values of their viewers. Participants mentioned that streamers who effectively communicate their personality and align with audience values through dynamic platform interactions may be more likely to create lasting viewer loyalty and financial support.

Fourth, community belonging and emotional support play an important role in areas such as engagement, motivation to follow, social values, and financial contributions. For some participant, it appeared that the desire to be part of the streamer's community often drives viewers to follow, engage, and contribute financially. Some participants mentioned feeling pressured to fit in with their peers, especially in chat communities, where donating or subscribing seems necessary to maintain their status. This matches the observation made by Stoebenau et al. (2013), that social standing and peer influence can impact financial decisions. Similar findings were made by Sun & Wu (2023), who discovered that live streaming services give individuals a place to socialize and develop a feeling of identity and belonging. According to Xu et al. (2023), membership in the community plays a major role in people's decision to make a financial contribution. Due to their sense of obligation to share the

community's beliefs, viewers also find that it greatly influences the encouragement of financial support.

*SQ1: How do young men perceive and engage with the personal branding strategies of live streamers?*

According to Tarnovskaya (2017), Personal branding includes many aspects, like the creator's personality, the topics they cover, the way they communicate, and the brands they choose to work with. All of this shape how authentic and relatable they seem to their audience. Young males tend to favor streamers who integrate these components in a manner that is authentic and reflective of their identity. It is evident that viewers favor a more personalized experience over one that is excessively commercial. When streamers focus too much on sponsored content or brand deals, it often causes viewers to lose interest. Companies are becoming more aware of how important influencers' personal brands are in keeping audiences engaged (Jorge et al., 2018; Schouten et al., 2020). As a result, it is important for streamers to maintain an image that feels relatable and authentic. While these findings met expectations, the depth of young men's aversion to overtly commercialized content was more pronounced than anticipated, suggesting that transparent and personalized branding strategies are key to fostering loyalty among this demographic.

Streamers' content not only reflects their personal brand but also plays an important role in establishing a brand community, strengthening the collaborative process of value creation between the streamer and the audience (Schau et al., 2009). Young males are motivated to engage with and follow streamers by a sense of community belonging and emotional support, as they both seek entertainment and a sense of connection. The success of streamers is frequently attributed to their personality, technical proficiency, and engagement methods, particularly in real-time platforms such as Twitch (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). The

streamer's personality is an important factor in driving engagement, as viewers are more likely to follow and interact with streamers whose personalities they perceive as positive and relatable. This aligns with the study's expectations, confirming that streamers' ability to foster emotional bonds and build community through relatable personalities is central to audience retention. The degree to which emotional support emerged as an important factor was an unexpected finding; it suggested a deeper psychological connection with streamers than had previously been thought. This suggests that streamers are becoming increasingly involved in their viewers' social lives.

*SQ2: How do young men perceive the role of live-stream platforms in shaping the personal branding of their favorite streamers?*

Participants indicated that platform-specific features such as badges, emotes, and interactive components such as personalized alerts prompted by donations or subscriptions prove essential for streamers to improve their personal branding. These technologies enable live streamers to create a unique and recognized experience by adding personalized noises or notifications, so making their streams stand out and viewers feel more involved. As previously mentioned, streamers develop a sense of community, and the implementation of strategies such as 'giving' subscriptions serves to reinforce this sense of belonging by enabling viewers to provide support to their peers. When this sense of community is combined with public acknowledgment through personalized messages, the relationship between the streamer and their viewers is further strengthened. Effective use of interactive components by streamers leads to a larger and more engaged audience. Previous research by Wang (2019) and Xu et al. (2023), supports the idea that real-time interaction can significantly contribute to a streamer's performance, and the personalized messages provided by these platform technologies back up

this statement. However, platform elements such as "raiding" or "like spikes" (Cai et al., 2023; Meisner, 2023) were observed only a few times during the live streams and were not mentioned at all in the interviews. Indicating that young men prefer direct participation over passive engagement approaches. This emphasis on personalized connection may be attributed to the emotional satisfaction viewers derive from being publicly acknowledged, which enhances the streamer-viewer bond.

*SQ3: How do young men perceive the personal branding of their favourite streamers and content creators in relation to their own spending behaviors on streaming platforms, such as donating, subscriptions, or other financial contributions?*

Johnson & Woodcock (2019) explain that donations give viewers a way to financially contribute, often with special chat symbols attached, while subscriptions allow for regular payments in exchange for exclusive icons. For many young men, the main reason for donating is to engage and interact directly with streamers. They want to be noticed and feel more connected, especially with smaller streamers who can respond in a more personal way. Donating to their favourite streamer is not just about the symbols, donations become a way to interact and be acknowledged by their favorite streamers. Subscriptions, on the other hand, are mostly driven by the special benefits made by the platform which they offer. Such as removing ads and gaining access to special interactive features, which enhance the viewing experience. Gifted subs are another way viewers build community, allowing others to join the subscriber group, which strengthens the shared experience.

Interestingly, a few young males expressed that they were under pressure from the community to donate. Stoebenau et al. (2013) report that the desire to conform to peer groups frequently influences financial decisions. Although their research did not specifically address

live streamers, it provides insight into the pressure that these young men experienced. This is reflected in the findings of this study, where several participants mentioned feeling obligated to donate in order to maintain their status within the community. In streaming communities, not donating can be perceived as a lack of support for their favorite streamer. This pressure to fit in was a recurring theme in the interviews and may explain why some young men feel compelled to donate, even when it was not their original intention.

*SQ4: How do young men perceive the personal branding of their favourite streamers and content creators in relation to their own social values and norms?*

While live-streamers might not project themselves to their audience as important role models, their influence on the values of young men, especially in the areas of self-improvement, fitness, and healthy habits including quitting smoking, is evident. Another important perception is that young men can relate to streamers' messages of authenticity, self-expression, and personal development. This aligns with Goodwill et al. (2019), who suggest that media figures can subtly shape perceptions of masculinity and self-image. Participants indicated, although streamers may not aim to serve as direct influencers of values, their behaviors and the way they present themselves can have a positive effect on young men's norms.

However, skepticism can arise when a streamer's projected values seem disconnected from their actual behavior. Kang & Park, (2022) and Pool et al. (2020) argue that young men's identities are influenced not only by societal norms but also by the personas and brands of media celebrities they admire. Some participants felt that, when this persona appears genuine, streamers can have a strong impact on the values of their audience. Despite some skepticism, values such as confidence and self-improvement still resonate with viewers,

suggesting that streamers can shape norms indirectly, even when they are not consciously seen as role models. This may be because certain positive aspects of the streamers remain relatable, even if their overall authenticity is questioned.

*SQ5: How do young men perceive the personal branding of their favourite streamers and content creators in relation to their own life objectives and aspirations?*

According to Wilson et al. (2022), the influence of role models on the aspirations of young men can be significant, shaping how they view achievement and helping them set life goals. However, streamers seem to have a limited direct impact on young men's life objectives and aspirations. The influence of live streamers on young men is more apparent concerning the interests and hobbies of their viewers. Several young males noted that streamers sparked their curiosity in new areas of interest or introduced them to new hobbies. Viewers also appreciated the insightful life lessons streamers offered, such as managing popularity and fostering humility. Mixed responses were observed in response to the wealth and luxury that streamers showed. While some young men perceived their achievement as motivating and admirable, others felt it was unattainable or undesirable. This pattern is somewhat consistent with the findings of Niemiec et al. (2009), who discovered that young adults generally give priority to internal achievement such as relationships and personal improvement above external success indicators like wealth.

The limited influence of streamers on life goals may also be explained by the third-person effect, where individuals believe others are more influenced by media than they are themselves. Hoek et al. (2012) argue that while marketers, brands and media frequently target young adults by relying on their uncertainty and desires. In this case streamers seemed to affect hobbies and interests more than long-term objectives. A potential explanation is that life

objectives are extensively personal and are less likely to be influenced by external figures, whereas hobbies and values are more adaptable and vulnerable to external influence. Furthermore, even if there is a subtle external effect on their primary goals, young men may be reluctant to admit it.

## **Theoretical Implications**

In the present research, the Two-Step Flow of Information and Parasocial Interaction Theory provided a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how the personal branding of popular streamers and content creators on live-streaming platforms relates to the personal development of young men.

The Two-Step Flow of Information theory suggests that social media influencers, such as streamers and content creators, serve as opinion leaders, influencing the beliefs of their followers (De Veirman et al., 2017). Similarly, live streamers may become opinion leaders in their communities and shape the beliefs and actions of their followers by developing a strong personal brand (Scheidt et al., 2020). This is partly confirmed in the present study, as streamers are shown to share valuable life lessons that their viewers adopt, as well as influencing hobbies and interests. However, this research extends the theory by emphasizing that for streamers to be effective opinion leaders, their personal branding must be perceived as authentic and relatable. A personal approach is more successful than a commercial one, meaning that continuously showcasing wealth or focusing heavily on commercial endeavors can weaken the connection between streamer and viewer. Furthermore, any disconnection between the image streamers present and their actual behavior fosters skepticism about the authenticity of their beliefs, which limits their influence.

Previous studies have shown that live streaming enhances the two-step flow by giving viewers the chance to engage through comments, likes, and shares. This interaction helps

create a sense of community and belonging (Cui et al., 2022; Samat et al., 2019). This finding is supported by the present study, which demonstrates that personalized engagement is more valued than a broad commercial strategy. Live streaming not only fosters a sense of community but also provides emotional support in difficult times for certain young men, emphasizing the importance of personalized engagement over commercial strategies. However, some viewers may experience peer pressure to donate or subscribe, fearing that they will be excluded from the community if they do not contribute.

Zha et al. (2023) assert that the Parasocial Interaction Theory has been frequently applied in settings such as influencer marketing, where developing parasocial relationships between influencers, and their followers has been linked to increased loyalty and a higher willingness to spend money on suggested products. This study supports these findings by demonstrating that devoted viewers are actually more inclined to spend money. In addition, it indicates that an important portion of this loyalty is derived from the satisfaction that viewers experience during their direct interaction with their favourite streamer. This interaction motivates financial donations in addition to enhancing engagement. While repeated interaction can strengthen the relationship between viewers and streamers, even first-time viewers may feel motivated to donate based on immediate connection or interest.

Research has also previously shown that influencers use content and interaction strategies to establish parasocial relationships with their audience, supported by both verbal and non-verbal signals on social media (Aw et al., 2023). This study agrees with these findings but also highlights the role of live-stream and platform dynamics in significantly enhancing parasocial relationships. Through these dynamics, the capacity to personalize messages fosters a greater sense of relatability and recognition between streamers and its audience, thereby strengthening the parasocial bond.



According to McLaughlin & Wohn (2021), the interactive nature of live streaming enables real-time communication between streamers and viewers, fostering a sense of immediacy and intimacy. This study demonstrates that immediacy and intimacy enhance the parasocial connection, while also clarifying how real-time interactions, personalized messages, and donations strengthen this relationship. It is possible for viewers to transform their donations into personalized messages, which provide them with acknowledgment even if the streamer is not directly aware of the viewer or the message. This dynamic contributes to the two-way communication, making the interaction more engaging than in traditional media occasions.

## **Practical Implications**

The findings emphasize how important authenticity and relatability are for streamers who want to build a loyal and engaged audience. Viewers, especially young men, tend to react more positively to content that feels real and not overly commercial. Streamers can use this insight by regularly interacting with their viewers in various ways. This could involve engaging in live chats, replying to comments, or giving personalized shout-outs.

To build lasting viewer loyalty, streamers should focus on honest and relatable personal branding. But the important aspect to maintain and to develop is consistent interaction that makes viewers feel appreciated. Real-time engagement, personalized donation messages, and custom alerts are all beneficial in cultivating a more personalized and dynamic environment. Research has demonstrated that the parasocial connection is significantly enhanced when viewers feel acknowledged, which is crucial for retaining audiences and influencing their purchasing behavior (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

This type of interaction frequently leads to an increase in loyalty and a higher likelihood that viewers will provide financial support. Besides that, it is also important to

maintain regular communication with the audience; however, collaboration with other creators may also contribute to the expansion of the community. These connections can be further strengthened by celebrating milestones together and rewarding loyal followers, such as with exclusive content or special recognition. By doing this and fostering this sense of belonging, streamers make their viewers feel personally invested in both their success and that of the community as a whole.

Brands can take valuable lessons from this study by understanding that successful collaborations with streamers depend on flexibility and authenticity. Streamers tend to connect more effectively with their audience when they have the freedom to incorporate products in a way that feels natural. For brands, this means embracing creative and personalized approaches to promotion, rather than sticking to rigid, scripted formats.

Viewers of live streams are more likely to trust the sponsored brand or company when a product or service fits naturally into the streamer's content. Therefore, streamers should be encouraged by brands and companies to present their product or service in a way that aligns with the streamer's unique style. This should also be well-received by the streamer's audience. It is essential for businesses to support this practice. This might mean streamers casually mentioning how a product fits into their daily lives or offering impromptu recommendations during a live stream. These natural placements are far more effective than traditional ads because viewers respond better to content that does not feel forced.

In addition, the research highlights the need of creating long-term connections as opposed to doing campaigns that are only conducted once. Streamers can establish a sense of familiarity and trust with the audience by showcasing products on many different occasions as a result of a continuous collaboration. The product is gradually integrated into the streamer's ongoing narrative, fostering a more powerful relationship between the streamer and the brand as a result of this recurrent exposure. This method not only enhances the authenticity of the

promotion but also facilitates the development of more profound relationships between brands, streamers and their audiences.

The research shows that community belonging, and emotional support are important for keeping viewers engaged for a longer period of time. Platforms could apply these insights by developing more interactive, community-driven tools that encourage both collaboration and a bit of friendly competition among viewers. For instance, platforms may implement collective milestones that require followers to collaborate in order to obtain incentives, including exclusive content or unique recognition. This may also encompass community challenges, in which distinct communities of streamers compete against one another to accomplish specific objectives. By providing specific advantages, these objectives should improve the viewer experience. Introducing this concept could greatly increase community and viewer engagement with the streamer. This could be beneficial for the streaming platforms, as it would encourage viewers to return more frequently, and for the streamer, who would see their community grow stronger. Potential metrics may include the duration of the overall watch session, the financial contributions, or the engagement in conversation. Each community may unite in order to accumulate points, with the goal of achieving a collective victory. This type of rivalry between equally large, and dedicated fanbases would not only fortify the individual communities but also foster a sense of unity among viewers. Platforms would provide fans with an additional incentive to remain engaged and invested in both the platform and their community by enhancing the competitiveness and dynamic nature of these interactions.

Another implication of the research is that streamers can shape the values, norms, and spending habits of young men. Numerous viewers have a profound sense of community; yet, this may result in implicit pressures, such as a desire to expend financial resources or conform to social norms. Young men should enhance their awareness of the techniques utilized by live-

streamers to engage their viewers. Streamers could gently advertise particular habits, products or lifestyles that affect purchasing decisions. It might be beneficial for viewers to ask questions about whether the information appears to be genuine or whether it is more influenced by commercial interests. This awareness can help them make better choices about how they engage with the content, making sure it fits with their own values.

This study also suggests that young men occasionally feel pressured by a streamer's community to contribute financially, in order to not lose their perceived place within the group. To further increase this pressure, some streamers may even stage conversations or reenact certain events to encourage more donations. To counter this, young men can take several actions. They could set a weekly or monthly financial limit to ensure they do not spend more than a set amount on a streamer. Additionally, young men should be aware that these events may be staged, and the perceived pressure from the community can be discussed if it becomes explicitly present.

Finally, streamers may promote particular norms and values intentionally or unintentionally. It is recommended that viewers contemplate the ways in which these messages influence their own objectives and behaviors. Young men can avoid adopting on behaviors only because they are known in the community by being conscious of this impact and only interacting with content that supports their particular values.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

This study is not without limitations. Initially, the findings' applicability may be limited by the relatively small sample size. The study could have yielded more profound insights into the ways in which young males perceive personal branding and how this relates to their personal development if it had included a larger group of participants. A larger sample could have revealed more variation based on factors like regional background, education, or

socioeconomic status. With a smaller sample, certain perspectives might have been missed or not fully explored. That stated, the results still provide valuable insights. Despite the limited number of participants, clear and consistent themes emerged about how young men engage with streamers' personal branding and how these perceptions tie into their identity, values, and goals. The qualitative approach of the research allowed for rich, in-depth discussions, which helped make up for the smaller sample size, ensuring that the findings are still reliable for addressing the research questions. For future research, the appropriate and beneficial step would be to raise the sample size. By involving a larger group, it may be possible to confirm whether the current findings are consistent across a broader population or if new patterns have emerged. More participants would help researchers to better determine whether the tendencies shown here expand or whether other factors influence how young men perceive personal branding and how it relates to their personal development.

Second, while all the participants in the interviews were Dutch, half of the streamers observed were American. This indicates that the results might not be applicable generally to other nations or areas. Streamers have a worldwide audience, hence personal branding may be seen differently elsewhere and shapes individual development in different ways depending on the location. Focusing on young males in the Netherlands enables this study to provide unique perspectives on how Dutch cultural values, shape the view of streamers and their branding. This regional perspective is especially pertinent for understanding the manner in which young Dutch males interact with streamers and evaluate personal branding. However, the findings remain highly relevant within the Dutch context, and important themes, such as the significance of authenticity, are likely applicable beyond the Netherlands. An in-depth examination of these subjects was facilitated by concentrating on a single country, which provided clear insights that other researchers can build upon. The demographic range of participants should be expanded in further studies. Although this study presents insightful

analysis of the Dutch setting, future research might profit from integrating individuals from several other nations and areas. Comparative analysis of nations and regions might assist to clarify and explain how young men from different backgrounds interact with personal branding and how regional factors affect their opinions.

Third, relying solely on observations and interviews has certain limitations. Due to the fact that young men are still in the process of discovering their identity, it can be difficult for them to appropriately describe their thoughts and emotions while they are being interviewed. They may experience feelings of embarrassment or discomfort when discussing specific topics, such as the emotional attachment they have to live-streamers or the pressure they experience from online communities. Because of this, some important insights may have been missed. Despite these challenges, the qualitative approach offered rich and detailed insights, helping to understand how young men view personal branding and how it ties into their development. The interviews uncovered certain trends in the interactions and actions of the viewers. However, the use of other qualitative techniques like as focus groups, case studies, or netnography may be able to reveal views and behaviors that are more difficult to express in interviews alone. For instance, case studies may provide a more in-depth examination of the relationships that exist between certain streamers and their audience, while netnography may provide insights into the ways in which online communities engage with streamers over time. By using these techniques, researchers would be able to understand patterns in a wider population. A multi-method qualitative approach could help researchers learn more about personal branding and how it shapes young men forming their identities in the future.

Finally, an additional implication of this research is that it primarily focuses on how viewers perceive streamers, rather than extensively examining branding techniques from the streamers' own point of view. Although the study shed light on the use of these methods, it did not completely capture the streamers' own reasoning or reasons for choosing a certain

branding technique. By focusing exclusively on young men's engagement with streamers, this study may have overlooked important insights about how streamers manage their personal brands and shape their brand identity. A more comprehensive understanding of the way in which young males perceive personal branding would have been achieved by also considering the intentions behind those branding decisions. Even if viewers do not completely understand the motives and intended end-goals of their favorite streamer, they are still the ones who engage with the content, therefore this study still provides insightful information. It would be beneficial to incorporate the streamers' perspectives in future studies. How intentional these efforts are, may be shown by looking closely at their unique branding techniques and goals. This could result in a unique comparison between the perspectives from the streamer and the perspectives from their viewers.

## Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore how young men perceive and engage with the personal branding of streamers and content creators on live-streaming platforms. The following research question was formulated: *How does the personal branding of popular streamers and content creators on live-streaming platforms relate to the personal development of young men?* A qualitative study was conducted, consisting of 12 in-depth interviews with young men from the Netherlands, as well as 14 hours of live-stream observations across six different streamers from the Netherlands, England, and the United States. These interviews and observations were transcribed and analyzed to understand how young men perceive personal branding and how it relates to their own spending behaviour, identity, values, and aspirations. It can be concluded that the personal branding of live-streamers and content creators could play an important role in the personal development of young men. Streamers who focus on authenticity and emotional, personalized engagement

help shape the viewers' consumption behavior, identity, social norms, and aspirations. These young men are more likely to connect and engage with streamers whose values and behaviors reflect their own. The results show that streamers' personal branding strategies, particularly those emphasizing authenticity and interaction create a strong bond with their audience and encourage long-term engagement and loyalty.

Prior research has examined the role of streamers as opinion leaders and the establishment of parasocial relationships, with an emphasis on engagement among audiences. This study enhances existing research by illustrating how authenticity and interactivity in personal branding shape the personal development of young males. It demonstrates that personalized and relatable branding, as opposed to commercial strategies, is more effective in establishing better relationships with viewers, developing long-term loyalty, and promoting emotional and social engagement. This study clearly illustrates that authenticity, interaction, and a sense of community in personal branding could play an important role on the personal development of young men. However, it also provokes questions regarding the consistency of these findings across various demographic regions or cultural contexts. Further investigation is necessary to determine whether personal branding techniques have an equivalent effect on young men from various cultures and regions, or whether there are notable differences in how these groups engage with streamers' personal branding initiatives.



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## **Declaration of AI Usage**

During the writing process of this thesis, artificial intelligence (AI) was used solely for the purpose of providing suggestions on grammar, synonyms, sentence structure and spelling errors. No generative AI was utilized in the creation of substantive or conceptual aspects of  
this paper