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Concept Paper

"You've Got to Put in the Time": Neoliberal-Ableism and Disabled Streamers on Twitch

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Abstract: This concept paper builds upon nascent research analyzing disability and the practice of videogame livestreaming on Twitch.tv. While a growing amount of scholarship analyzes the structure and organization of Twitch as a platform more broadly, with some attending to the platform's marginalization of women and BIPOC streamers, few studies investigate the challenges that Twitch's features and structures present to disabled streamers. This paper addresses this gap in the literature, considering the ways in which Twitch offers disabled streamers unique economic and community-building opportunities through its monetization and identity tag features while simultaneously presenting barriers to disabled streamers through these very same features. Utilizing a critical disability studies perspective and drawing upon forum posts made by disabled streamers and interviews with disabled streamers from online gaming news websites, I argue that Twitch reifies forms of neoliberal-ableism through its prioritizing of individual labour, precarious forms of monetization that necessitate cultures of overwork and 'grinding', and targeted harassment, known as hate raids, against disabled and other marginalized streamers to ultimately create a kind of integrative access where disability is tolerated but not valued.

Keywords: livestreaming; Twitch; gaming; video games; disability; critical disability studies; ableism; accessibility

Citation: Escobar-Lamanna, J.C. "You've Got to Put in the Time": Neoliberal-Ableism and Disabled Streamers on Twitch. *Societies* **2024**, *14*, 75. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc14060075

Academic Editor: Gregor Wolbring

Received: 3 April 2024
Revised: 13 May 2024
Accepted: 21 May 2024
Published: 23 May 2024

1. Introduction

Since its formation in 2011, the livestreaming platform Twitch.tv has come to occupy a central place in gaming culture. With an average of 2.57 million concurrent viewers in 2024, Twitch has become essential in understanding "how video game players in North America (and, indeed, across the world) experience and engage with games and game communities" [1] (p. 466), [2]. Alongside a live videogame-play feed, Twitch streams typically consist of a video feed of the streamer playing the game, graphical overlays displaying new followers or subscribers, and a chat feature that sits beside the stream window, allowing viewers and streamers to interact with one another in real time. While the chat creates a "sense of simultaneity", it is all of these elements combined that create a unique and interactive experience for both streamers and viewers [3] (p. 617). Although an entirely separate category of Twitch streams known as IRL (in real life) do not consist of any videogame-play and are more similar to vlogs, this paper focuses only on the gaming side of Twitch and streams/streamers that involve some kind of videogame-play component.

Unsurprisingly, Twitch's rise in popularity has been accompanied by increasing academic interest in understanding the platform through a variety of frameworks. Scholars have undertaken analyses of viewers' motivations for watching others play videogames [4,5], have performed platform and economic analyses of Twitch [6–9], and have studied the labour performed by streamers within the context of exploitation and/or participatory culture [10–12]. This literature, as Bonnie Ruberg, Amanda L.L. Cullen, and Kathryn Brewster write, "while critical, largely celebrates the potential of live streaming platforms as sites of community building, personal expression, and the exploration of new frontiers in video game play. However, to date, less scholarly consideration has been given to

identity-based discrimination and harassment in video game live streaming" [1] (p. 467). Scholarship that does attend to identity-based discrimination on Twitch has focused on the policing/deplatforming of and harassment towards women [1,13–15] and BIPOC streamers [16–18] on the platform.

While there is limited scholarship to date on streaming and disability, what exists largely focuses on the aforementioned benefits of Twitch and only occasionally considers the challenges disabled streamers face. Mark R. Johnson finds that Twitch offers disabled streamers unique economic opportunities, alternative forms of employment, and a space to build communities of fellow disabled streamers and supportive viewers. While Johnson also notes that Twitch presents unique challenges for disabled streamers that "merit further study", he concludes that the positive effects of streaming wholly outweigh the negative [19] (p. 517). Sky LaRell Anderson and Johnson, utilizing a social perspective on disability, note that streaming has the potential to offer disabled streamers gaming capital, described as "accomplishments in gaming culture", and found that "their [streamers'] ability to manage the many physical and emotional challenges presented by their disabilities came through the creation of their streaming and gaming personae" [20] (p. 1909). Finally, Katie Ellis and Lachlan Howells find that disabled streamers "claim a crip identity" by "emphasising rather than diminishing their disability" through the use of features such as video feeds, profile pictures, and descriptive tags [21] (p. 233). They surmise that streaming on Twitch offers disabled gamers a space to practice the personal as political in which "disabled streamers challenge notions of compulsory ablebodiedness by coming out crip, controlling the stare, and in some cases gaining employment" thus "performing an affirmative model of disability" [21] (p. 225)[1]. When investigating the benefits streaming on Twitch offers disabled gamers and how these streamers may challenge traditional understandings of disability by visibly claiming a positive disabled identity, it is also important to consider how Twitch simultaneously marginalizes these streamers through many of the same features and/or opportunities.

This paper aims to address and expand upon Johnson's call for further study of the challenges disabled streamers face on Twitch. By analyzing the platform through a critical disability studies (CDS) framework and drawing on forum posts and interviews with disabled streamers from gaming news sites such as Kotaku and Polygon, I attend to dimensions of societal ableism on Twitch that are in many ways ingrained into the platform, its features, and what is expected of streamers. I argue that although Twitch supports disabled streamers and, in some capacity, encourages them to thrive through unique opportunities for communal and economic support, there remains the reproduction and proliferation of societal ableism through the valuing of individualized production/labour, precarious monetization strategies, and targeted attacks against marginalized streamers. Ultimately, I contend that these challenges problematize, but do not eliminate, the benefits Twitch offers disabled streamers, creating a kind of integrative access [23] wherein disabled streamers are not expressly excluded from the platform but where harmful underlying forms of ableism continue to exist.

2. Critical Disability Studies and Ableism

CDS is a relatively recent turn in the broader field of disability studies that expands upon, and in many ways moves away from, more traditional, materialist and/or rights-based lines of thinking in the field—namely, the social and minority models, respectively. Briefly, both the social and minority models challenge the societally dominant medical model, which frames disability as individualized biological deviance that is deemed deficient and tragic in comparison to normative bodies and, therefore, a problem to be solved [24] (p. 27). The social model splits disability from impairment, rejecting the notion that disability is caused by individual physical impairment; it is instead a direct product of inaccessible, restrictive, and/or oppressive social practices and barriers that people with impairments are disabled by [25,26]. A minority- or rights-based model builds upon previous civil rights movements, such as the gay and Black civil rights movements, to frame

people with disabilities as a minority population [27] (p. 82). The aim of the minority model is to achieve inclusion and access via legal rights and regulations [27] (pp. 81–97), [28].

Although it is an incredibly diverse and interdisciplinary field of study, CDS expands upon these approaches by calling attention to the ontology of disability itself, attending to the social values, norms, and structures that create the category of disability to begin with. By doing so, CDS scrutinizes the societal valuing of a non-disabled identity: an identity that everyone is told they should individually work towards achieving [29–31]. To think about access and accessible spaces/structures from a CDS perspective, then, is to think not only about the inclusion of disabled people in society (either through employment or through legal rights, as the social and minority models do), but also about the ableism that underpins society, othering disability and framing it as undesirable, lacking, and unable. It is to think about how, even when disability is socially visible, present, and even valued, there can exist the "ableism of access" [23] (p. 4), a kind of integrative access that accepts but does not value disabled bodyminds.

While ableism is often used as a catch-all term to describe any societal discrimination levied against disabled people, Gregor Wolbring contends that ableism is an "ability-based and ability-justified understanding of oneself, one's body" [32] (p. 79). It is defined by other critical disability and ableist scholars as social processes, beliefs, and relations that actively work both consciously and unconsciously to uphold a particular identity, non-disabled, as "essential and fully human" [33] (p. 44), [34,35]. By idealizing non-disability as essential, ableism ontologically sustains the category of disability by separating it from ability—one is understood via its distance from/opposition to the other and, as such, requires it to exist [34] (pp. 6–7). Central to these beliefs is the valuing of a normative citizen that is "ready and able to work and contribute" [36] (p. 57). According to Dan Goodley, this is played out in neoliberal society as neoliberal-ableism, a system in which "we all individually concern ourselves with our own productivity" [37] (p. 28). As such, neoliberal-ableism upholds a non-disabled citizen as ideal by valuing entrepreneurship and individualized economic production/consumption, processes that are "co-constituted at the mundane level of the everyday as well as being structurally and hegemonically located" [37] (p. 74).

With a cursory understanding of CDS and how I and other CDS scholars define ableism, I now turn my attention to Twitch and how, despite the benefits streaming can offer disabled gamers, the platform perpetuates exclusionary neoliberal-ableist discourses, creating a kind of integrative access that does not question or challenge these underlying forms of neoliberal-ableism. I then end with a discussion on thinking about access more critically and how interrogating accessibility and ableism on Twitch can inform and contribute to the broader field of disability media studies.

3. Sites of Ableism: Precarious Grinding, Monetization, and the Disabled Hero

3.1. Grinding and the 'Meritocracy' of Twitch

To begin a discussion of ableism on Twitch, it is important to establish that many Twitch users hold the false belief that Twitch is a meritocracy [1] (p. 476). More generally, videogames themselves are perceived as a meritocracy where "everyone has a 'fair' shot at achieving success", also a mis-held belief as videogames often highlight and deepen existing forms of social inequality and exclusion [1] (p. 471), [38]. Indeed, the perceived necessary competencies required to play games and engage with gaming culture are, as Brendan Keogh argues, not apolitical despite appearing as such but "entangled in historic contexts" as, in their infancy, games were targeted and advertised towards young, white men with disposable income [39] (p. 78). This creates a feedback loop wherein games and gaming cultures continue to be made for and geared towards this demographic, which in reality is only a small fraction of the larger videogame player base, thus continuing the marginalization of other player bases such as disabled gamers [40] (p. xxiii) [41]. This dominant approach to gaming culture continues on Twitch through the promise that anyone can stream and, if you work hard enough, stream often enough, and are entertaining

enough or are a skilled competitive videogame player, you will attract viewers, grow your stream, and eventually be able to earn a stable income from the practice: a promise that conceals many not-so-readily apparent barriers and forms of exclusion.

Part of this belief in a Twitch meritocracy is fueled by the increased availability of stable internet connections and webcams/microphones, meaning almost anyone can conceivably start streaming [12]. For disabled people who may be unable to work a traditional job, the option and availability of streaming as an alternative form of at-home employment is alluring. However, the ability to earn a stable income from streaming on Twitch and jumpstarting a streaming career is not so straightforward. Ashley M.L. Brown and Lis Moberly call attention to economic inequalities, arguing that despite the potential for anyone to stream on Twitch, viewers increasingly expect technologically high-quality streams. The procurement of such necessary high-end equipment and fast internet connections for BIPOC, who are more likely to live in poverty, presents challenges other demographics may not face, meaning that "equal participation on Twitch depends on having the financial means to support oneself while building a community and personal brand [starting streaming], which many lack" [42] (p. 61). This insight could be extended to new disabled streamers as well, as worldwide "disabled people are markedly over-represented amongst the poorest stratum of society" [43] (p. 46).

On top of the high initial cost, there is no guarantee that consistent streaming will equate to increased viewership and economic income. As A. Houssard et al. write, "the real ability provided by Twitch for new streamers to make use of the platform affordances to derive monetary gain from their activity is more limited than one could expect" [7] (p. 8). New streamers may stream consistently for months or even years with no viewers, despite their best efforts to grow their streams [44]. Charlotte Panneton names this system of relations a culture of precarity and grinding that is central to Twitch's design. Panneton describes this culture of grinding as "streamer activity oriented toward a sense of progression. . .Grinding on Twitch is framed as a necessary part of aspirational or serious streaming, requiring the accumulation of hours on-stream, stream-hours watched, concurrent viewership, monthly stream quotas, and strategic on-stream game selection" [45] (p. 277).

This culture of grinding is reflected in the amount of time streamers feel they need to work. Streamers are often live eight to ten hours per day, six or seven days of the week, feeling that they are, as streamer ProfessorBroman remarks, "expected to be live for as many of them [hours] as possible" [46]. Johnson and Jamie Woodcock find that streamers typically work more than the average 35 h per week—in addition to the fact that many streamers still work other jobs [47] (p. 343). While this workload is not required as streamers are ultimately free to set their own streaming schedules, Johnson reminds us that "keeping up a regular and intense schedule has become increasingly central to success. . .Without regularity, the upper limits of success on Twitch appear to be bounded" [19] (p. 513). In a panel presentation from TwitchCon 2020 entitled "Life in Hard Mode: Streaming with Disabilities", visually impaired streamer GlitchedVision0101 advises that disabled streamers should find ways to make themselves comfortable when live so they are able to stream for long hours as "Twitch is ultimately sometimes a grind, you've got to put in the time" [48] (7:18:45). Although some may be tempted to dismiss this labour as undemanding, since streamers are simply playing videogames, the effort and energy streaming requires should not be understated. Streamers must keep focused on the game they are playing, be engaged with and responsive to viewers interacting with them through the chat, and be generally entertaining for 8–10 h at a time. Additionally, there is off-camera work that is not readily apparent to viewers. This can include administrative tasks, community management, and/or creating graphical overlays—work that is often referred to as entrepreneurial labour in its own right, as streamers are selling their image and brand in an attempt to garner viewership and, subsequently, the potential for monetary income [10,12]. On top of these day-to-day tasks, there is a dimension of emotional and affective labour streamers partake in while streaming [49,50].

3.2. Monetization Methods

Another element to consider is how Twitch streams are monetized. Common monetization methods include subscriptions, in which viewers can give a minimum of $5.00 USD (and up to $25.00 USD) monthly to streamers, and bits, which are "a virtual good that your viewers can use to Cheer in chat to show support"; a streamer receives $0.01 USD for each bit cheered [51][2]. Other monetization methods include advertising/sponsorship deals and receiving direct donations or 'tips' from viewers through PayPal or other third-party platforms. While any streamer can receive tips, typically only streamers with an already sizeable audience will be able to secure sponsorship deals [8] (p. 5). Similarly, in order to receive bits and/or subscribers, streamers must be either a Twitch Affiliate or Partner, which requires certain criteria be met such as a minimum number of followers and hours streamed over a 30-day period [53][3]. As such, monetization through bits and subscribers encourages the notion of grinding and values the ability to perform individualized labour, both of which become necessary to earn an income from streaming. As Panneton contends, "the underlying logic of Affiliate and Partner programs is that if an individual streamer puts enough work into their stream, they will be given the opportunity to see a monetary return for their continued efforts. . .[this] justifies the more arduous and unrecompensed work done in the present" [45] (p. 279). However, in addition to the work it takes to even apply for the Affiliate/Partner program, there is no guarantee that a streamer will be accepted upon applying, nor that their channel viewership will substantially grow once they are an Affiliate or Partner. Furthermore, streamers can lose their Affiliate or Partner status due to inactivity.

Therefore, while Twitch offers "substantial economic and business opportunities for those with chronic conditions", it also presents an immense amount of individualized labour and, as established, does not guarantee this labour will materialize any of these opportunities [19] (p. 516). Johnson does point to this barrier in mentioning the amount of work disabled streamers are often required to undertake. However, it is important to consider that Johnson only conducted interviews with professional or semi-professional streamers to reach his conclusion that the benefits of Twitch outweigh the barriers for disabled streamers [19] (p. 44). Johnson's conclusions are drawn from data provided by those who were able to grow their stream to a point where they could make a career from the practice. There are, however, external factors at play, such as the physical, mental, or financial ability to stream for eight to ten hours a day, all of which can present barriers to other disabled streamers attempting to become Affiliates/Partners. For every disabled streamer who is able to grow their audience to the point of making streaming a career, there may be many more unable to, such as those with chronic pain who physically cannot engage in the consistent grueling work schedule that Twitch demands. There may be those living in poverty or without a stable income who cannot afford to buy the necessary equipment needed to produce technologically high-quality streams or cannot afford to invest endless hours into streaming with no promise of economic return. Finally, there may be those whose intersectional identities create even more complex barriers in the face of these challenges, as Twitch favours those who have historically occupied a privileged position in the larger gaming industry and culture—straight, white, and I argue non-disabled, men [1]. These unequal opportunities for stream growth and economic income are obfuscated by grind culture and the obsession with and expectation of individualized entrepreneurial labour and productivity. The grind culture and monetization strategies so embedded in Twitch and its structures (un)intentionally uphold and value the very same labouring citizen of neoliberal-ableism—a streamer who, with enough work, will be able to grow their viewership base and make a career of streaming, making it seemingly possible for anyone to achieve.

This thinking is reflected by many disabled streamers themselves. In a discussion thread on the "User Voice" forum, Twitch's official feedback forum, disabled streamer littlenavi_'s post highlights these exact challenges; it reads:

> Those of us with chronic pain or other disabilities are not always able to keep a schedule that is consistent enough to apply for the org we program [sic]. The current requirements [for making Partner/Affiliate] are built on able-bodied standards. There should be a way to include disabled folks who can't stream on a set schedule and may need to take breaks from streaming, but stream consistently when they can and have good viewership and engagement when they do [54].

In response, other disabled streamers voiced similar concerns. Bishoukun commented "as another disabled streamer, with LITERALLY NO SOURCE OF INCOME outside of government welfare, and with streaming being a HUGE PASSION for me, I don't even know that I could make Affiliate - even though that would be my dream". Ughlycoyote writes "Honestly, as a profoundly disabled creator, I disagree with the partner program being set to an able-bodied standard; it's set to an egregious standard that demands streamers to treat their channel like a full-time job and is a risky bet at best for anyone trying to make the jump from affiliate to partner". Finally, StriderCreations remarks that "I am a disabled art streamer and can stream from 20 min–3 h depending on my pain levels and have no way of judging this beforehand. A streaming career as a homebound disabled individual is a perfect dream, a touch of help from the Twitch community to understand schedule variability would be wonderful". In a separate post, PSYMILL remarks that "disabled streamers just don't get a fair shot at making it to "Partner". I have physical issues which have obviously created an unfair playing field to make the numbers required" [55].

3.3. The Disabled Hero

Continuing an analysis of Twitch from the perspective of ableism, we can also point to the idea of the disabled hero, and why the existence of a handful of successful disabled streamers who do stream for a living does not equate to Twitch being truly accessible and inclusive. I argue that successful disabled streamers, perhaps unintentionally, reflect the ableist image of the disabled hero—disabled people who are respected in society for their personal determination and individual hard work in the face of adversity. However, the "focus on personal responsibility precludes any discussion of social, political, or collective responsibility", thus overlooking the fact that many have resources and advantages other disabled people do not, such as occupying other positions of privilege [56] (p. 89). Disability becomes normalized and accepted in part, but only insofar as to further spread the ableist valuing of the individual working citizen who can overcome challenges via their own merit. As J. Logan Smilges writes, "disability can no longer be regarded as always already marginal. Sometimes it's not-so-marginal" [23] (p. 17).

I am not suggesting here that being a successful streamer directly espouses the belief that with hard work one can overcome their disability, nor am I am suggesting that disabled streamers who make a living from the practice are intentionally partaking in lateral ableism by engaging in "the competitive, individualized, entrepreneurial subject formation that is key to neoliberalism's success" [57] (p. 39). What I am suggesting is that a small number of disabled Partner/Affiliate streamers on Twitch does not affirm the notion that anyone can make it if they work hard enough, and that the visibility of disabled bodyminds on Twitch does not necessarily make it an accessible space that presents all disabled people with an attainable alternative form of employment. By celebrating Twitch as a transformative space for disabled gamers and pointing to successful disabled streamers as proof of Twitch being accessible and inclusive, we can unintentionally reify the harmful societal belief that with enough work anyone can become successful and 'make it' in the digital meritocracy of Twitch, ultimately leaving behind and further marginalizing other disabled bodyminds that did not or cannot make it.

4. Official Forms of Support and Harassment

Before continuing with a discussion of the ableism present on Twitch and the further marginalization of disabled streamers, it should be noted that Twitch does support disabled streamers in some capacity and does not overtly suppress their streams from being

discovered, as TikTok has done in the past [58,59]. For Global Accessibility Awareness Day, Twitch features only disabled streamers on the site's homepage for the day, helping them grow their channels through exposure [60]. Even in the context of monetization, the fact that any streamer is allowed to provide links to third-party donation platforms means that, to some extent, Twitch supports all streamers in earning some income, even those with small followings who may not be able to become Partners or Affiliates. Donation links are not only allowed but are an embraced and integral feature of Twitch, as viewers "are consistently eager to support their favorite streamers" and streamers "think nothing of encouraging as many donations from their viewers as possible" [8] (p. 9). Through this official support from Twitch and certain platform features, we see that streaming does offer disabled people some unique opportunities for community growth, support, and at times economic income.

Perhaps the most notable form of official support in recent years was the introduction of identity-based tags in 2021, intended to give marginalized streamers "more ways to be discovered and viewers more ways to find communities that they want to call home" [61]. In Twitch's own words, tags have always existed as a way for "creators to describe what they were streaming, not who they were or stood for" [61]. This includes tags such as spoilers, the name of the console the streamer is playing on, or the genre of game they are playing. Identity-based tags allow streamers to tag their stream with descriptors such as transgender, queer, Black, and disabled. Viewers can now search for streams with these tags. As Nathan Grayson explains, "Twitch is a platform with precious few avenues for discoverability. . . New tags, at least, go part of the way toward remedying that problem, especially for marginalized streamers who previously had trouble finding new viewers and each other" [62].

Tags not only aid disabled streamers in discoverability for monetary ends but also in growing a supportive community. Lachlan and Howells describe how disabled streamers utilize these tags to "reflect on their health and embodiment, or describe the intersections between their identity and disability pride" [21] (p. 226). Because of the social and participatory elements of the platform, "people with disability can forge new relationships with members of the public, with the lens of game-play affording new opportunities for communicating the crip experience while fostering community online" [21] (p. 226). Disabled and other marginalized streamers often acknowledge the positive aspects that a supportive community found through Twitch has for them, and how identity tags have helped them find these communities [48,63]. Streamer Jeff Brutlag, who uses the 'non-binary' and 'gay' tags, said in an interview with BuzzFeed News that "I think it's also really important to find people that you identify with, because there might be people out there who are still struggling with the idea of coming out, or maybe have just recently come out, and are just trying to look for the people that they just vibe with and can feel absolutely safe with" [64]. These communities and their communal methods of support for each other through donations, mutual exposure, and use of identity tags could even potentially push back against the valuing of individualized labour and normative bodies on the platform, in a similar vein to how Kishonna L. Gray argues that Black streamers on Twitch can disrupt "the norm of the space designated for privileged bodies" [16] (p. 366). As Panneton contends, "Twitch has several native affordances that could be reappropriated for the purpose of cooperative engagement, including the platform's 'raid' function, which allows streamers to end their broadcast by sending their current audience to another live channel" [45] (p. 286), another common feature of the platform.

Despite these benefits, however, identity-based tags are simultaneously used to further exclude and harass disabled streamers. While acknowledging the advantages of identity tags, many marginalized streamers also note the increase in targeted harassment they have brought, specifically in the form of hate raids [65]. Hate raids occur when a particular streamer is targeted and harassed through their stream's chat based on their identity—harassment that sometimes continues off-stream. These incidences of harassment are not isolated, and have become so widespread that marginalized streamers organized the

#ADayOffTwitch protest in which they took the day off from streaming [66]. In an interview with gaming news site Kotaku, queer and disabled streamer Dominick Evans said that the new tagging system "was not a victory" but a "consolation prize, and while it will help some people find community, which is always a great thing, they [Twitch] won't do anything to combat any prospective hate we get as a result" [62].

The targeted form of harassment hate raids bring is unfortunately nothing new for marginalized gamers, and has been ongoing within Twitch and broader videogame culture for years. Black streamers have continually been targeted, harassed, or otherwise ignored as legitimate streamers/gamers [1,16,18]. The harassment of women, not just on Twitch but in the larger gaming industry, came to a dangerous head with Gamergate in 2014/2015 [9] (pp. 233–236), [67]. However, identity tags give harassers an easy and convenient way to find potential targets through an official feature that is supposedly meant to support these very same targets. Samantha Puc writes that "after Twitch implemented dozens of identity tags to better connect sub-communities, from Black to Transgender to Anxiety, some users abused the system. And it was queer streamers, creators of colour, and disabled people—the most marginalized groups on the platform—who were primarily targeted" [65]. Reflecting this position, Catherine Han et al.'s quantitative study of hate raids found that "user-specified identity tags were operationalized to attack marginalized groups" [68] (p. 21).

Twitch does offer streamers tools to combat and report hate raids. Additionally, Twitch will ban automatic or 'bot' accounts that exist simply to spam and harass streamers, again signaling their support for marginalized and disabled streamers. However, this has not "prevented dummy accounts from continuing to have a profound impact on marginalized streamers" and, despite offering streamers tools to "block specific words and mitigate harassment", hate raids continue due to harassers' use of "deliberate misspellings, targeted remarks that don't contain objectionable language, and other creative loopholes to get around them" [69]. Similarly, Han et al. note that "the security practices employed by Twitch at the time of this wave of hate raids did not deter these relatively unsophisticated attacks" [68] (p. 68). Often, streamers will take matters into their own hands by permanently banning harassers individually. This approach, however, "means streamers—not Twitch itself—are expected to clean up messes, and no matter how well-equipped they are, sometimes there's only so much they can do", in addition to the fact that the owner of a banned account can simply create another account using a different email address [62]. Indeed, Twitch's support policies have rarely ever fully supported marginalized streamers, and their dubious methods of support and offloading of community regulation onto streamers can inevitably do more harm in perpetuating new forms of toxic engagement on the platform [9] (pp. 231–233), [70,71]. Although Ellis and Howells recognize the presence of ableism online, and Johnson notes that "issues such as trolling affect underrepresented and minority communities to a far greater extent than others", neither considers these barriers within the confines of platform features meant to support streamers, nor do they consider Twitch's lackluster response to such issues and what that means for accessibility and inclusion on the site [19] (p. 514), [21] (p. 231).

5. Integrative Access and Critical Media Accessibility

Despite official support for community growth via identity tags, I contend that embedded within Twitch there continues to exist an ongoing exclusionary attitude, historically present within gaming culture, towards disabled and other marginalized streamers, seen through targeted attacks such as hate raids. Twitch's lackluster response and provision of ineffective tools to deal with hate raids further promotes the normalized streamer as a non-disabled one who would not face such harassment. As such, I argue that Twitch's support policies uphold a kind of integrative access for disabled streamers, which "seeks to accommodate disability instead of redressing the ableism that originally prohibited access" [23] (p. 21). Smilges argues that integrative access does not mean the express exclusion of disabled people from a given space, and even allows for full levels of partici-

pation. Accessibility is multi-dimensional, with some aspects physical (the visible presence of disabled bodyminds) and others discursive and ideological. In reflecting on their own experiences of integrative access in school, Smilges writes "access didn't eliminate ableism; it enabled ableism to bare its teeth" [23] (p. 4). Similarly, Mia Mingus reminds us that "access for the sake of access is not necessarily libratory [sic]" [72]. Integrative access tolerates but does not value disability. Although disabled streamers are officially supported in their endeavours to stream on Twitch and official policies exist to aid them in dealing with harassment, these policies are a reactionary effort aimed at inclusion rather than a more liberatory effort to address the proliferation of societal ableism and forms of exclusion on the platform. We see ableism on Twitch not only bare its teeth but proliferate and spread through hate raids and targeted harassment against disabled streamers via the use of officially supported tools meant to help these creators grow their communities and viewership numbers.

To better understand integrative access on platforms such as Twitch and in everyday media more generally, we can turn to critical access studies that interrogate the supposed universally beneficial nature of accessibility. As Elizabeth Ellcessor argues, although access is often framed in a static and positivist manner within traditional media studies, "a discrete state that can be achieved", this understanding often obfuscates ongoing exclusions and community-led efforts to increase accessibility [73]. From this traditional perspective, we can view the presence of disabled streamers on Twitch as evidence that Twitch is an accessible space. However, this one-dimensional framing conceals how the platform's ableist norms and structures favour a non-disabled streamer and the resulting challenges disabled streamers may face. Again, Ellcessor; "participation is not automatically accessible simply because it is available" [74].

One way to grapple with the limitations of integrative access is through theorizations within critical access studies that look beyond traditional understandings of access and accessibility. Meryl Alper writes that "critical media access studies can offer valuable insights into 'accessible' media use and media environments in a way that does not unquestionably accept to laud their gestures toward accessibility" [75]. More broadly, critical access studies "challenges 'access' itself as universally beneficial or beyond reproach" [75,76]. Access is thought of not as a static binary state but a fluid process, one that is in flux and constantly changing based on the needs and participation of users as well as their unique forms of interaction with a given technology or media [73]. Through this lens, accessibility on Twitch can be seen as an active process in which streamers and viewers' engagement with the platform create new understandings of accessibility or the lack thereof on the platform. Furthermore, analyzing Twitch from a critical disability and critical access perspective expands our understanding of how technological platforms and digital media can reinforce normative forms of engagement that exclude many disabled users while remaining accessible and often beneficial to these very same users.

6. Conclusions

This paper has argued that while Twitch supports disabled and other marginalized streamers in their endeavors to earn a source of income and/or build networks of support and community—two important ways in which Twitch streaming can benefit disabled streamers—the platform still perpetuates forms of ableism that reinforce the societal marginalization of disabled people. By utilizing a critical disability framework, we see that neoliberal-ableism proliferates through cultures of grinding, precarity, and problematic monetization strategies that favour streamers able to undertake the demanding task of becoming an Affiliate or Partner. These ableist underpinnings present potential barriers to disabled streamers looking to earn a stable income from the practice and problematize the aforementioned benefits. Additionally, harassment and targeted attacks against disabled people, which have increased in recent years through hate raids, complicate the potentiality for disabled streamers to use Twitch's identity-based tags and other features to foster supportive and inclusive communities. Twitch's lackluster response to such harassment further

cements the normalized streamer as a non-disabled one and creates a form of integrative access that creates space for disabled streamers but does not challenge underlying forms of ableism on the platform.

There exist, however, communal points of resistance against these ableist logics, particularly among disabled and otherwise marginalized communities of streamers and viewers. As previously mentioned, raiding is a way for streamers to show communal support for one another through an already existing Twitch feature. Outside of official features, many marginalized streamers are increasingly creating and distributing unofficial tools to combat hate raids. Such tools often act as plug-ins for streamers to use during a stream and are designed to automatically block accounts listed on a community-populated list, delete hateful chat messages, and activate a subscriber-only chat mode if a hate raid were to begin (a setting in which only those subscribed to the streamer can post in the stream's chat) [68][4]. Beyond these helpful tools, there is a plethora of community-created resources, groups, and information pages such as Hate Raid Response and "Break Glass in Case of Emergency" (a guide posted on the r/GirlGamers subreddit), both aimed at better informing marginalized streamers about hate raids and what they can do to prevent or deal with them and protect themselves if one were to occur [77,78]. While these community-created resources may be in their infancy and are constantly evolving to meet the needs of streamers and new forms of harassment, they contribute to an understanding of accessibility in digital and online media more generally as an ongoing process in which new kinds of both exclusion and accessibility are created by users and their forms of engagement with technology and/or media. As Ellcessor writes, "access is not a prerequisite to participation — access and participation depend upon each other. Just as access enables participation, so does increased participation by diverse people in diverse contexts and practices ultimately make possible expansions of access" [74] (p. 196).

Ultimately, while studies have begun to analyze the relationship between streaming and disability, more research is sorely needed to fully flesh out how the platform simultaneously supports disabled streamers in unique ways and reinforces certain ableist values/beliefs. Disabled communities formed on Twitch and their communal methods of support both on and off the platform could be viewed from a crip/disability justice perspective that considers the ways in which crip communities can "invent new ways of countering oppression and generate new forms of being-in-common" [79] (p. 24). Future qualitative studies should attend to the intersectional identities of disabled streamers to more robustly understand how these ableist logics on Twitch differently affect those who identify as/are LGBTQ+ or BIPOC. Additionally, while Ellis and Howells write about performing disability on Twitch within a crip framework [21], this could be taken further to understand how disability is performed and/or presented (or not) in the absence of a video feed of the streamer, a particularly important consideration as Vtubers become more popular on the platform[5].

What is paramount to take into consideration when moving forward with and expanding upon this nascent field of inquiry is that the existence and even success of disabled streamers on Twitch does not make it a truly inclusive and accessible space. Future research on Twitch and the platform's politics must consider the experiences and insights of all disabled streamers—not just those who have 'made it'. Marginalized gamers have historically been excluded from the broader landscape of gaming culture and this trend continues on Twitch, meaning we must critically attend to the discursive and relational elements of ableism and disablism that may appear on Twitch in novel or otherwise unexpected ways.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data are contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

[1] An affirmative model of disability sees disability as a positive and formative identity, not a tragic one, that can offer unique embodied insights on society and culture [22].

[2] Streamers do not get to keep the entirety of these profits, as Twitch splits revenue with streamers 50/50. In 2023 Twitch introduced a new 70/30 revenue split for streamers, more in line with revenue sharing on other livestreaming platforms like YouTube Gaming. However, in order to benefit from this new revenue split, streamers must retain a minimum of 350 subscribers for three months before they can apply to join the Partner Plus program [52]. Essentially, this more generous revenue split is only available to streamers with an already sizeable viewer base.

[3] To become an Affiliate, streamers must have 50 followers, three average concurrent viewers in the past 30 days, and 500 min broadcasted in the past 30 days. Once an Affiliate, streamers can apply to become Partners, allowing them access to more features such as longer video-on-demand storage, priority customer support, and a verified channel badge, among other benefits. Becoming a Partner requires 1000 followers, 75 average concurrent viewers in the past 30 days, and 25 h broadcasted in the past 30 days [53].

[4] While subscribers-only mode is also an official Twitch feature that can be helpful in dealing with hate riads, it should not be seen as a long-term solution, as a subscriber-only chat could hinder a streamer's ability to grow their channel by engaging with new audiences and viewers who are not subscribed.

[5] Vtubers are streamers who do not display a video feed of themselves but rather one of a digital avatar, which is displayed on stream and mirrors streamers' movements and expressions in real time.

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