Women on Twitch Turkey: Affective Communities and Female Solidarity Under Patriarchy and Postfeminism

Deniz Zorlu, Izmir University of Economics, Turkey

Nazlı Özkan, Koç University, Turkey

Abstract

This article examines the experiences of female streamers and podcasters on Twitch Turkey primarily through in-depth interviews conducted with 35 respondents. Despite the platform's growth as one of the most widely visited social media sites and the biggest online game streaming platform, there is limited research as to how gender identities and geographical location shape streamers' experiences and usage of the platform. We argue that female streamer's use of Twitch Turkey is marked by combined patriarchal pressures and neoliberal, postfeminist thrust for aggressive competitiveness. Sexual harassment is the major problem for women, and pervasive patriarchal relations of domination affect all female streamers' usage of the platform, who often find themselves scrutinized and criticized for their body images, clothing, and gaming performances. In exerting control over their behavior, patriarchy, however, affects women in different ways based on their cultural preferences and personal habits. We also argue that Twitch Turkey tends to push women to adopt postfeminist subjectivities to rigorously compete with each other for limited viewership, sponsorship, and income opportunities. However, these pressures and constraints are resisted and re-negotiated especially through the formation of female solidarities and affective communities in online streaming.

Introduction

1   In recent years Twitch has emerged as one of the most widely visited social media sites and the most popular game streaming platform in the world (Sjöblom et. al. 2019; Anderson 2017; Deng et. al. 2015; Chen and Lin 2018; Churchill and Xu 2018). Reaching 15 million daily visitors by 2018, Twitch viewership has attained comparable numbers to TV networks in the US (Sjöblom et al. 2019). Twitch became the fourth largest website in the US regarding the peak internet traffic (Deng et. al, 1) and used "the eighth most internet bandwidth out of all websites" by 2014 (Anderson 2014, 1). Similarly, its popularity has witnessed a surge in Turkey, and about 24% of 53 million internet users in Turkey have visited Twitch in 2020 (Bayrak 2020). Twitch serves as a streaming and video podcasting platform, allowing its users to live stream, as well as posting recorded videos that remain accessible for later viewing. Even though it is initially designed for gamers, its uses are not limited to video games, and streamers can create different types of video content based on their personal preferences. With its diverse usages, Twitch can be conceived as

a platform that fosters and combines "digital intimacy, celebrity, community, content creation, media production and consumption, and video games" (Johnson and Woodcock 2019, 338).

2   The rising audience appeal of Twitch has led to an increasing scholarly interest in the platform (Sjöblom et al. 2019; Johnson and Woodcock 2019; Heaven 2014; Hilvert-Bruce et al. 2018), but only a few of these works examine how gender identities shape the platform's streaming culture (Todd and Melancon 2017; Taylor 2018; Nakandala et. al. 2017; Chen and Lin 2018). Previous academic studies often focus on the use of Twitch in Northern American and Western European contexts. Since regional factors play a significant role in shaping the way streamers make use of online platforms, we turn our attention to Turkey, a less explored socio-political and cultural context. With an average of over 1200 active channels streaming in the Turkish language in a week, Turkish is the 11th most spoken language on Twitch.[1] In Turkey, there have been journalistic accounts of Twitch that have focused on the experiences of female streamers[2], yet, an academic study is lacking despite women's increasing involvement in the platform. We believe these journalistic studies fail to unveil the breadth of women's experiences, as well as the socio-cultural implications of online streaming, which is a further reason for us to examine the platform's usages.

3   Based on 35 in-depth interviews, this study addresses these lacunas in the academic literature by exploring the ways female streamers on Twitch Turkey experience and make use of the platform. Twitch Turkey serves as a tool of social connection, personal experimentation, and financial gain; however, we argue that the male-dominated environment of the platform also means crystallization of online harassment and patriarchal pressure, and Twitch Turkey tends to promote neoliberal, postfeminist hyper-competition among streamers. Yet, in countering the patriarchal pressures and the prevalence of postfeminist notions of competitive empowerment, the platform also leads to the formation of affective community-building practices and to deliver messages that emphasize the significance of female support networks.

4   The academic literature highlights that online spaces have become new sites of misogyny and sexual harassment (Megarry 2014; Henry and Powell 2015; Poole 2013; Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016), while also serving as significant tools for feminist activism, often presenting

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[1] This statistical data is obtained from the website: https://twitchtracker.com/languages
[2] For instance, see *BBC News Türkçe*, "Twitch Dünyasında Kadın Gamer Olmak." (To Be a Female Gamer in the World of Twitch). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4AsBgy6D18

inventive ways to resist gendered discrimination (Tambe 2018; Salter 2013; Bowles Eagle 2015, Rentschler 2014). Additionally, they are also seen as postfeminist spaces of competitive, self-centered empowerment, corresponding to the neoliberal emphasis on hyper-individualism (Barnard 2016; Tildenberg and Cruz 2015; Caldeira, De Ridder and Bauwel 2018). Defined as a complex combination of feminist desires for women's empowerment and a re-emphasis on patriarchal notions of femininity in the context of neoliberalism, postfeminism promotes competitiveness and self-reliance, as well as a passage from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, and empowerment through a renewed emphasis on femininity, construed as bodily property (Taylor 2011, 8; Gill 2007, 5; Genz and Brabon 2009, 177). It is often argued that postfeminism entails a simultaneous negation of patriarchal discourses and their reproduction (McRobbie 2009, 6; Gill 2007, 5; Genz and Brabon 2009, 177).

5   We argue that as a neoliberal capitalist enterprise (Johnson and Woodcock 2019, 344; Johnson et al. 2019), Twitch Turkey tends to promote postfeminist notions of hyper-individualistic empowerment where women have to compete with each other for the limited supply of viewers, donations, and sponsorship deals. We suggest that the formation of postfeminist subjectivities in the context of Twitch Turkey lend themselves with greater ease to patriarchal expectations and demands, rather than invalidating them. However, our interviews indicate that there is also a strong tendency among female streamers to denounce the aggressive competitive empowerment that at times pervade the platform by developing affective communities and female support networks. Our research thus expands the discussions on gendered use of online platforms by describing how heightened patriarchy and postfeminism may culminate in denunciations of patriarchal discrimination and neoliberal aggressive competition, bringing to the fore the significance of female solidarity and affective community-building practices in online streaming.

Literature Review and Theoretical Underpinnings

6   The academic literature on women's use of social media platforms tends to show substantial variation depending on the affordances of specific platforms. Studies on Twitter and Facebook typically indicate that these online spaces are the new face and vitalizing component of feminist activism and resistance in the 21st century (Salter 2013; Bowles Eagle 2015; Rentschler 2014), as demonstrated clearly in the initial spread of Metoo# movement through Twitter (Tambe 2018). Instagram, however, due to the platform's affordances as primarily an image-sharing site,

is often conceptualized as undertaking the dual work of both challenging and reproducing hegemonic standards in regard to the representation of women (Caldeira et al. 2018, 25). Accordingly, women's online images can serve to both resistive and hegemonic purposes, and even the same images can simultaneously have empowering and disempowering effects for giving a sense of affective uplifting to the individual sharing the pictures, while at the same time reifying oppressive norms (Barnard 2016, 47; Caldeira et al. 2018, 28). Despite hopeful promises of empowerment, it also frequently stressed that social media platforms are also the major grounds of misogyny and sexual harassment (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2015).

7   It is argued that despite the existence of many video hosting and streaming websites, Twitch.tv has partially gained worldwide popularity due to its features that allow the creation of intimate social bonding and "participatory communities" (Anderson 2017; Hamilton et al 2014; Sjöblom and Hamari 2017, 993). Accordingly, it is primarily through Twitch that the video game industry, which is often "considered inhuman, robotic, or purely digital," went through a "corporeal turn," bringing to the fore social relationships and interactions (Anderson 2017). Twitch is also considered as an essentially a neoliberal platform and a site that encourage the formation of neoliberal subjectivities among its users (Johnson and Woodcock 2019, 344; Johnson et al. 2019). As the statistical data from the US indicates, the top 1% of streaming channels collect 70% of all viewers (Deng at al. 2015), replicating the operation of neoliberal capitalism that gathers the wealth in the hands of a small minority. As a neoliberal capitalist enterprise, Twitch tends to stimulate a postfeminist atmosphere of hyper-competition among women for a limited number of viewers. Postfeminism promotes competitiveness and self-reliance, endorsing the idea that women can attain personal success chiefly through their individual efforts (Gill and Scharff 2011; Evans and Riley 2015). Akin to neoliberal ideology, in postfeminism individual agency takes precedence over any type of collective action and bonding among women (Kauppinen 2013; Gill 2017, 611).

8   Postfeminist media culture encourages planning, close self-regulation, and "self-reinvention," to the point that the self becomes an object of continual monitoring and self-evaluation (Gill 2007, 160–161; Gill and Scharff 2011). This postfeminist emphasis on self-actualization and re-invention is criticized for generating novel sites of performance anxiety for women (Tayler 2011, 29). Postfeminism entails a re-embrace of conventional notions of femininity, sexual subjectification, and a renewed emphasis on the body as an inherent source of female power (Taylor 2011, 8). A key characteristic of postfeminism is that it typically works from

inside patriarchal relations of dominations for women to gain power individually, rather than aiming for collective achievement or larger societal change (Schwan 2016, 476). Our interviews indicate that women are often pushed to become competitive to attain greater popularity on Twitch Turkey. However, our research also points out that women invent alternative ways of using online streaming to defy patriarchal expectations and market-based competition, stressing female solidarity, and the significance of building affective communities.

Methodology

9   Our research relies primarily on semi-structured interviews. We carried out online interviews with 35 Twitch streamers over a period of four weeks. Our study partially relied on snowball sampling; some of our initial interviewees introduced us to their female streamer friends, who, in turn, led us to their female streamer friends on the platform. However, to avoid communicating only with a network of friends, we got into touch with several streamers by directly accessing them through Twitch. The infrastructure of the platform allows us to search for and produce a comprehensive list of streamers broadcasting in the Turkish language, on the condition that they broadcast at the moment when we view the site. Furthermore, through the website https://twitchtracker.com/, we can also find all Twitch users who stream in Turkish listed according to their average audience numbers. Most streamers have an email address in their personal pages, and it is typically through email that we first contacted them.

10   Existing scholarship on online streaming is criticized for exclusively or primarily focusing on top broadcasters, as a result, not reflecting the experiences of the majority of streamers that populate these online platforms (Lottridge 2017, 3). This can be seen as a major problem in the study of streaming on Twitch precisely because top broadcasters typically constitute a small fraction of the Twitch community of streamers (Deng at al. 2015). Not to fall in line with this criticism, we have tried to choose broadcasters with various degrees of online popularity, which we believe can demonstrate a greater range of streaming experiences. The two basic measures of popularity are the number of streamers' general followers and the number of their actual viewers. Followers are those people who have an interest in the streamer, but they do not necessarily watch the live streaming sessions. Streamers often upload partially or fully their streaming content to Twitch, thus letting viewers watch their clips at a later time. Still, as our interviewees indicate, the main indicator of a streamer's popularity on Twitch is the actual number of viewers who watch

their live streams, showcasing their current audience appeal. This information is immediately accessible on Twitch during streaming sessions and the website https://twitchtracker.com/ provides an extensive list, documenting how many people watch the sessions of a particular streamer in any given hour, day, week, and month. In our selection, we tried to mix higher levels of audience popularity with its medium and lower levels. As such, a portion of our interviewees is watched by a daily average of several thousand people, whereas our other interviewees are watched by several hundred people and an average of fewer than 100 people.

11   We also took into account several demographic traits in our selection process, such as the geographical location and age of our interviewees. We tried to ensure our interviewees are geographically dispersed and cover different age groups. Majority of streamers are located in three major Turkish cities, Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara, but we also interviewed streamers from 5 additional Turkish cities, and two streamers who currently reside outside of Turkey. The majority of streamers are in their early twenties; the youngest interviewee is 18 and there are a number of broadcasters in their late twenties and early thirties. The majority are currently university students, few of them finished their college education, and a number of them have never attended university or quit school. Some are currently working in full-time or part-time jobs, some of them earn their living exclusively through their Twitch streams, and for others, Twitch is merely a hobby without expectation of any notable financial return.

12   Based on the semi-structured research design, we asked all our interviews the same set twenty-five questions, though depending on the nature of the conversation we made additional queries for them to further elaborate their experiences. These initial questions can be found in the Appendix. A number of interviewees asked us to send a written copy of the questions, and we provided them in advance, otherwise, the majority of interviewees were given a basic outline of the project before the online meeting. All interviews were carried out in Turkish, which is the first language of all our interlocutors, and, after transcription, we have opted to translate to English only what we believe are the most significant parts of the several hours of interviews. Even though the high majority of our interlocutors gave us permission to use their real names and usernames in quoting them, we have decided to use pseudonyms for all of them to ensure their privacy.

13   We should also briefly mention our positionality as researchers with regard to our research subjects. Deniz Zorlu is primarily interested in media studies, cultural studies, and gender studies, and Nazli Ozkan is a media anthropologist interested in the use of digital platforms in Turkey.

Thus, this study allowed us to combine our strengths in academic research. The project took off as online gaming and streaming communities have been a topic of academic interest for Zorlu, and Özkan became part of the study due to her interest in digital media. Naturally, not all the people we contacted replied or accepted our request for an interview. We also noticed that some established names who earn considerable income directly through Twitch and their sponsorship deals were hesitant to take part in our research. Yet, we also saw that many of our interviewees were more enthusiastic to talk about their experiences on Twitch than we expected, and they verbally expressed their thankfulness for carrying out this study. We hope that our research can perhaps play a role in voicing their concerns and making the platform a more welcoming digital place for female streamers.

Myriad Faces of Patriarchy and Misogyny

14   Our study demonstrates that sexual harassment and bullying of female streamers on Twitch Turkey is widespread. The high majority of our interviewees indicated that they have frequently encountered sexual harassment and emotionally scarring behavior from Twitch audiences. Many stressed that they have seen harassment in each one of their streaming sessions, and that sexual harassment is the number one problem for women on Twitch (Peri, Tülin, Evren, Yağmur). For some, online harassment spread to the real world as they encountered men who followed them at their schools and showed up in front of their houses (Aygül), while some others have their house addresses and phone numbers shared online to intimidate them (Yağmur, Tuba). Some of the women either contemplated quitting, temporarily stopped, or are planning to stop streaming in the future, as a result of sexual harassment and online bullying (Oya, Ayşen, Alara). Some also suggested that there were times when online harassment made them feel insecure when they went out into the street (Tuba).

15   Most of them do not hesitate to classify these verbal attacks and harassments as psychological violence, indicating that even though they are strong or grew resilient in time, harassment and degrading remarks inevitably affect them. Several interviewees believe Twitch Turkey can do more to curb sexual harassment and bullying, like permanently banning IP addresses, instead of just banning the user, who can return simply by logging in with a different username (Ebru, Kıymet, Elif, Canay). Many also claim that this is not really about Twitch, and there is not much the platform can do, as this is a reflection of a general societal problem that

cannot be fixed without larger socio-cultural change (Mehtap, Duygu). Most women stated that twitch.tv can be seen as a microcosmos to the real-world problems women daily encounter and parallel street harassment, while also emphasizing that harassment on Twitch often get worse as the shield of anonymity prevents people from facing any real consequence for their actions (Neşe, Peri, Elif, Yağmur, Dilara, Canay, Meltem). Some indicated that they would not have let people talk to them in the real world in the way they often do on Twitch (Elif). Yet, others suggest that they are often more afraid in the streets especially at night, as there is then the danger of physical harm, unlike what happens in the online world (Arya). Some also suggest that, even though it is not fully adequate, the ability to ban harassers gives women some ground, as opposed to street harassment where a ban button is not available, and it is easier to raise your voice against online harassment (Derya, Sare, Dilara).

16   Women also frequently encounter bullying for their body-images, facial features, hair, make-up, clothing, and gaming performances. Women's physical appearance and their outfit are constantly scrutinized, as if they are under a microscope for examination, as one streamer says (Neşe). Multiple women noted that they recurrently received degrading and ridiculing remarks about their facial features, such as the size of their nose, their body weight, their teeth, or their make-up (Yağmur, Ayşen, Arya, Meltem). Audiences and sometimes even moderators can indulge in controlling behavior towards women, expecting them to be smiling and pleasing at all times, and get upset when their requests are not followed (Laçin, Canay, Gamze, Sare). Yet, to talk about harassment and the difficulties of being a woman on Twitch carries the risk of stigmatization and accusation of being a man-hater (Tülin) or seeking popularity by creating trouble (Elif). Many also stress that women also engage in toxic behavior and utter sexist slurs towards other women (Tuba, Rengin, Yağmur, Gamze, Sare).

17   Even though nearly all interviewed women are victimized by sexual harassment and bullying, our research, nonetheless, demonstrates that patriarchal pressures and oppression often take myriad forms, and women experience their effects in non-uniformed and contrasting ways. Some of our interviewees indicated that they behave deliberately in a masculine demeanor to evade online harassment (Kıymet). They argued that adjusting their online behavior towards what they deem as masculine demeanor, like using swears words and slangs too frequently, allow them to pre-emptively block unwanted advances, as well as facilitating their general acceptance by the male audiences as one of their own (Kıymet).

18 Another group of broadcasters, in contrast, said that they felt the pressure to conform themselves to feminine standards of beauty as their online behavior is slated for being too masculine. One of our interviewees indicated that she often wears red lipsticks to project a feminine image even though she does not like it and virtually never puts on red lipsticks in her offscreen life (Mehtap). She adds that she counter-balances her red lipsticks with a reverse cap, thus, not allowing her self-image to be completely determined by audience expectations and desires. This can be seen as an example of a frequently occurring phenomenon under conditions of patriarchal control, where women develop ways to negotiate and re-negotiate patriarchal demands.

19 Multiple women noted that they don't feel comfortable and can't wear certain outfits, such as tank tops, skirts, and shorts, as they almost immediately receive harassing messages (Evren, Çilem, Neşe, Dilara). Several interviewees indicate that even at the height of summer and even though they like tank tops, they still have to modestly dress a shirt to evade harassment (Evren, Meltem, Tülin). Others mention that they can immediately be accused of "using their femininity" to attract audiences for clothes they enjoy wearing in their everyday lives (Yağmur). Several other women also indicate that they do not want to be perceived as someone who advances their fame through sexualized imagery; thus, they are very careful about what they wear, which, we believe, can be seen as an additional layer of cultural pressure constraining women's choices. Women also regularly encounter the pressure to appear sexy or in alignment with mainstream beauty standards and are chastised for not being so (Mehtap). Hence, as many streamers concur, on Twitch Turkey many women often encounter the dual pressure of being conventionally attractive without appearing too sexual, trying to maintain an impossible balance as if walking on a tight rope.

20 In her study on Twitch streamers in the US, T. L. Taylor (2018) observes that the platform closely regulates its users' attire in a gendered manner. A similarly gendered dress control is also at work on Twitch Turkey, where woman users can be banned because of their choice of attire. Despite such international resonances in gendered dress policy, some of our interviewees suggested that Twitch surveils women in Turkey more strictly than in other countries. According to Yağmur, "on Twitch global, women can show up in their underwear and nothing happens" but once she "wore a sports bra and got banned for three days." Rengin also concurs with Yağmur, indicating that women's clothing is a bigger issue on Twitch Turkey.

21   Our only interviewee who wears Hijab claims that she faces much more pressure and harassment because of her attire compared to other Turkish female broadcasters (Burcu). She asserts that many people believe she is out of place in a gaming and streaming platform because of her chosen outfit. She argues that other Turkish women laugh aloud, yell and dance in front of the camera freely, but it immediately becomes an issue and gets condemned if she briefly raises her voice, as people expect her to behave in an unassertive and docile manner as a natural accompaniment to her Hijab. Another woman, who started her streams wearing Hijab, indicated that she was verbally attacked for wearing it (Kıymet); later, when she decided not to wear Hijab anymore both in her offscreen life and in her streams, she faced the accusations of faking a conservative identity to pull the audiences, this time being effectively chastised for not wearing Hijab. Hence, our research indicates that online sexual harassment and bullying primarily and persistently affect women. However, even though patriarchy has a controlling and restrictive effect for all women streamers, their online practices affect their lives in myriad and changing ways.

Twitch, Postfeminism, and Beyond

22   In recent years, there has been an increasing mainstream media attention to female streamers in Turkey, which often focuses on their physical beauty, rather than streaming content. Many female Twitch celebrities have been invited to take part in television programs, and some even quit streaming after their transfer into more mainstream media productions. Some of our interviewees indicate that their priority is to have a career in online or mainstream broadcast media, they have not played video games before joining Twitch, they use Twitch in coordination with their various other social media sites without attributing any specific value to it, or they started Twitch streaming because their previous streaming activities in different platforms have not yielded the expected results. Two different long-time streamers said in our interview that they are contacted by several aspiring young women asking for tips on how they can become popular through streaming (Mehtap, Duygu). In short, many streamers appear to perceive Twitch primarily as a step in the direction towards greater media fame. Streaming on Twitch Turkey is thus part of the culture of "micro-celebrities" or "internet celebrities" that pervade the use of online spaces (Sjöblon et al. 2019, 21; Fietkiewicz et al. 2018; Zhang and Hjorth 2019, 808).

23   As indicated before, at times streamers' usage of the platform approximates neoliberal/postfeminist notions of hyper-individualistic and competitive empowerment that

perceives femininity primarily as a bodily property. As a notable anecdote, one streamer produced a successful music clip in August 2019 that has so far been watched about 35 million times on YouTube, and she is currently one of the most accomplished streamers on Twitch regarding the number of her daily audiences. This YouTube clip, even though this is the first appearance of the young woman in a music video, is professionally made, demonstrating the linkages between various online platforms, as well as the mainstreamization of online streaming. The clip showcases her talent as a singer and performer, but it is also worth briefly mentioning how the lyrics and the clip portray female subjectivity performance on Twitch. She says:

> "I give my poses…they are in menopause. We always make fun; they are all sluts. Don't interrupt with my good moods… Avoid my imitators; I am the one who starts trends… What's your problem; are you looking for trouble? There is trouble on Twitch, her name is Ela [the singer's name]. Twitch is my job; our team is enlarged… You show your body parts; no one ever cared; you are seeking popularity; run, it takes time to catch up." (transl. DZ and NÖ)[3]

24   We see her in fashionable low-cut dresses in driving and singing in several expensive sports cars and an airplane, as the lyrics describe an atmosphere of bitter rivalry specifically among female streamers. She emphasizes her youthfulness in comparison to her rivals whom she says are already "in menopause," in a postfeminist fixation with female youth. Women are described as natural foes in an endless clash for fame and success in a postfeminist language of aggressive competitiveness and self-centeredness. The lyrics claim that women "show their body parts" to increase their popularity on Twitch, while the clip emphasizes wealth, luxury, and care-free living.

25   However, unlike the lyrics of the song that claims no one cares about it, most women on Twitch appear to consider sexualized imagery and language as contributing factors to the overall sexism that pervade the platform. Even though all of our interviewees steered clear of victim-blaming, indicating that women shouldn't be harassed or mistreated no matter how they may choose to dress or behave, the high majority are still critical of female broadcasters whom they believe play an active role in perpetuating the sexist atmosphere of the platform, by an alleged sexualized display of their bodies and the tolerance they show towards harassment in their attempt to maximize the number of their followers. Some of our interviews claim that sexualization sets

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[3] "Veririm poz da…onlar hep menopozda… Geçeriz dalga onlar hep yosma. Twitch benim isim, genişledi ekip . . . Derdin ne senin bela mı istiyon bela mı Bela Ya Twitch'de bela vardır onun adı Eladır Ela. Açarsın oranı buranı, kimsenin umurunda olmadı, prim pesindesin, koş yetişmek zaman alır."

the standards of expected behavior from women (Duygu). "They expect all of us to be just like them," said one of our interviewees in reference to male audiences whom she believes primarily watch women for the sexualized content of their broadcasts, further adding that while they have to struggle against men who treat them as sex objects, they feel like they are being betrayed by women who self-objectify for personal gain (Kader). Another interviewee said that she finds it deeply disturbing when women "smile at sexual harassment" in order not to lose audiences (Peri). A streamer said she is mortified by women who engage in sexually charged activities, like demanding people to subscribe or donate in return for twerking on camera (Ebru).

26   In a frequently encountered line of comment, many of our interviewees say they believe women change themselves drastically after they start streaming to meet gendered expectations and to attract audiences to their channel in the competitive environment of Twitch (Canay, Sare, Dilara). Women "change too much, they give compromises from who they are," claims a streamer (Sare). In that regard, some of our interviewees stress that they firmly believe women should be able to dress the way they want and should not be criticized for it; what troubles them is that they believe many women change how they look and how they behave to conform with the expectations of a primarily male audience base (Sare). Some suggest that it is the competitive environment of the platform that pushes women to try to approximate conventional beauty standards and sexualize themselves to have a competitive advantage (Mehtap).

27   A streamer who has been intermittently on Twitch Turkey since 2014 as one of the earliest woman broadcasters in the platform claimed that she witnessed the growing sexualization of the platform. It appears to her that certain conventional markers of beauty like thinness, blondness, fair skin, and the wearing of sexy outfits often determine female streamers' popularity (Mehtap). She says women have greater potential than just "showing off their breasts" on camera, and they are wasting it, which saddens her. Another streamer says she is frustrated that women are not applauded primarily for the quality of their streaming, as there are many excellent women gamers and broadcasters on Twitch Turkey who don't receive the level of attention they deserve (Tuba).

28   Another interviewee says that she earned her living exclusively through her Twitch streaming for three years, claiming that women ultimately can find themselves choosing between trying to be popular or maintaining certain principles. She says that women should ask themselves whether they want to be an "idealist person or want to be successful. If you are an idealist person then you cannot be successful on Twitch" (Duygu). According to her, the more people behave in

an "ugly manner," the more they attract the spotlight and earn money. She says nowadays on Twitch private scandals that resemble sensational tabloid newspaper stories seem more effective in attracting audiences than quality content.

29   A number of our interviewees indicate that at times competition and rivalry among women can run amok (Sare, Mehtap, Peri). "There is an enmity between us," indicates one interviewee lamentingly referring to female streamers. She further suggests that it sometimes feels like you are a small fish in a large sea, "surrounded by sharks," and you should watch out other streamers, including female streamers for your own good (Sare). Some also indicate that as the larger share of viewership is in the hands of male streamers, women often find themselves pitted against one another to increase their number of audiences in the smaller portion of the viewership (Peri).

30   In light of these comments and critiques, we would like to raise two parallel arguments in regard to the operation of postfeminism on Twitch Turkey. Even though postfeminism is theorized as a mixture of feminist aspirations and pre-feminist notions of femininity that both challenges and reproduce patriarchy, our research indicate that in the context of Twitch Turkey postfeminist ideals of sexualized and hypercompetitive femininity appear to lend themselves more readily to reproducing patriarchal relations of domination, rather than subverting them. However, we also observe that the hypervisibility of postfeminist femininities invites resistance and the formation of alternative female performances in online streaming. As a common theme that comes across in multiple interviews, many streamers stress that they rigorously follow certain streaming rules even if that means losing audiences and they actively reject problematic expectations from women in online streaming (Peri, Mehtap, Arya). We believe they appear to be under the double bind of both patriarchal and neoliberal/postfeminist pressure, and that they try carving out alternative spaces that oppose and re-negotiate these demands.

31   One major way to contest both patriarchy and postfeminism is to stress solidarity among women. For instance, Sare asserts that, instead of bitterly competing, "women should be able to support each other," and she often uses her streams to inspire other women. Similarly, Elif points out the need for women to unite and support one another. Several streamers highlight their efforts to keep female audiences in their vicinity by treating them with greater sympathy, in practicing "affirmative action" in their favor. Elif emphasizes that the gendered discrimination on Twitch may now look inevitable but she believes "this situation will change with the growth of solidarity among women." Tülin similarly states that solidarity among women is especially important in

countering sexual harassment, and she frequently uses her platform to bring to the fore the difficulties of being a woman on Twitch and Turkey. Hence, even though Twitch Turkey does not seem to be a platform for explicit feminist activism—and in fact, some women wanted to note in our interviews that they don't consider themselves feminist— a significant number of women use the streaming platform to forge female solidarity and support networks.

32   Arya is the most popular female streamer on Twitch Turkey regarding the number of her daily viewers, she also received an award for being the most successful female streamer in 2019 in a competition. In our interview, she indicated that about half of her general audience are women, which is unusual on Twitch as the numerical majority of audiences are men, and the majority of our other respondents pointed out that their streaming is primarily watched by men. A significant number of our interviewees mentioned her name spontaneously either as an inspiration or a role model, even though we didn't directly ask questions about other streamers. It is also worth mentioning that she has a YouTube channel dedicated to her, named as "Bacılar Diyarı," or "Land of Sisterhood."

33   One of our respondents mentioned Arya's distinctive loud laughter as a positive example that defies notions of female propriety (Mehtap), another suggested she likes that Arya is not in full alignment with mainstream beauty standards (Tuba), and many others commended that she does not present herself in a sexualized manner, while also praising what they believe her natural, noncompetitive demeanor. We believe it is precisely Arya's success as a streamer without any clear allusion to patriarchal and postfeminist expectations that earns her so much credit and admiration in the eyes of female streamers. Her achievements seem to pinpoint the possibility of attaining success for many female streamers without conforming to postfeminist stress on self-interested, sexualized, and hyper-competitive subjecthood. We argue that Arya receives remarkable support from other female streamers because she offers an alternative way to become successful in the cultural atmosphere of online streaming that many women believe leaves only limited options. In other words, her popularity especially among female streamers demonstrates that the postfeminist atmosphere promoted by Twitch Turkey is in tension with a critique of the performance of hypercompetitive femininity.

34   In addition to building female-support networks, women on Twitch also foster a sense of a collectivity in the platform by harvesting special relations with their followers that they call community or family (Taylor 2018, 90). Many streamers suggest that Twitch often means a refuge

from boredom and challenges of off-screen life, allowing them to build close friendship ties and intimate bonds with like-minded individuals (Alara, Dilara, Meltem). For some, streaming can serve as a support network in times of emotional need (Tülin), and many insist that online streaming's most desirable aspect is the ability to meet and network with people whom they otherwise won't be able to know in any other way (Duygu). For instance, one streamer suggests that even though she considers Twitch as her job and a major source of income, a major reason for her streaming is the affective link she builds with her followers and that she already starts missing her streaming community if she stops broadcasting for only two days (Aygül).

35   Several of our interviewees suggest that nurturing this community is only possible if one prefers not to be popular (Alara, Canay, Sare, Meltem, Dilara). They argue if they prioritize increasing audience numbers and revenue, they also start facing rising levels of toxic audience behavior. They state that they are very careful not to tolerate any type of problematic behavior in their channel at the expanse of losing audiences. A top female streamer suggested that she left Twitch when her viewers had grown exponentially to become unmanageable but returned a couple of months later to re-connect with her loyal core audience (Alara). It is often argued that Twitch streaming gives "participants opportunities to engage more deeply" (Hamilton et al. 2014, 1318). In this case, it also appears that these alternative communities also develop in reaction to what streamers believe toxic components of the platform, and as a result of a desire to separate themselves from online toxicity. We believe these examples also showcase how heightened patriarchy and postfeminism give way to their criticism in leading up to the creation of small but alternative Twitch communities and female solidarities.

36   However, it should also be stressed that putting aside desires to increase their viewership on Twitch in order to maintain a strong ethical stance cannot be an easy choice for all women, especially since there are streamers who depend on Twitch for their livelihood. For instance, one of our interviewees indicates that her streaming identity is largely a performance that has little to do with her actual personality, and she tolerates toxic and harassing male behavior to a certain extent, but she does that as she depends on the money she gets from Twitch for her livelihood (Kıymet). Hence, even though the majority of our interviewees believe there are spaces of agency for women to resist complying with various problematic and sexist expectations, this may not always be an easy task for women whose circumstances of life make them depend on the income they garner from online streaming.

Conclusion

37   Our research indicates that, even though the content of their streams naturally showcases substantial variation, we can still notice certain parallels and resonances in the way streaming is experienced by women on Twitch Turkey. Patriarchal power structures and oppression are omnipresent in the male-dominated environment of Twitch Turkey. The majority of our interviewees indicate that sexual harassment is the biggest problem for women, while also noting that women are closely and regularly scrutinized and criticized for their dresses, body images, make-up, and gaming performances in what amounts to psychological violence. Female streamers can feel restricted in their clothing choices and online behavior to evade negative audience reactions. However, as demonstrated, women also encounter and experience patriarchal pressures in differential and nonuniform ways, depending on their cultural preferences and personal habits.

38   The majority of our interviewees are critical of streamers whom they believe self-objectify and tolerate toxic male behavior to increase their online popularity and following, as they are accused of playing a role in perpetuating the sexist atmosphere that negatively affects all women. Several interviewees claim that women often change themselves too much after their introduction to streaming on Twitch in order to appeal to the patriarchal expectations prevalent in the platform. Many of our respondents also believe that women have an agentic space to reject complying with and counter problematic expectations on Twitch Turkey. However, our research cautions us against such straightforward assertions, as some of our interviews demonstrate that women's agency against patriarchal and sexist expectations have their certain limits, especially when women depend on their Twitch streams as their sole or a major source of income.

39   We believe online streaming has a tendency to encourage the formation of neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivities, which condition women to compete with one another. Postfeminism is often considered as an amalgam of feminist desires for women's empowerment and a neoliberal emphasis on hyper-individualism, serving both to challenge and re-produce patriarchy. Our study, however, indicates that in the context of Twitch Turkey, where patriarchal dictates are arguably more stringent, self-centered and hypercompetitive models of empowerment purported by postfeminism primarily serve to re-instate patriarchal relations of domination, rather than subvert them, as women's self-interested attempts at empowerment seem to necessitate a stronger alignment with patriarchal expectations of the male-dominated platform.

40   We also argue that the hypervisibility and combined pressure of patriarchal and postfeminist expectations give rise to their denunciation, reflected in the efforts to build female solidarities and alternative Twitch communities that prioritize affective interaction that oppose the atmosphere of hyper-competition and virulent misogyny. In other words, affective communities partly emerge in response to the competitive environment promoted by postfeminism, and as a way of countering online sexism. Hence, even though Twitch Turkey does not appear to be a particularly viable platform for explicit political activism, women's streaming is often shaped by feminist-inspired deeds and the formation of female solidarities and affective communities that flourish despite, and in opposition to postfeminist aggressive competitiveness and patriarchal domination.

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Appendix

Below can be found the English translation of the research questions. In line with the semi-structured nature of our research project, and depending on the initial responses of our interlocutors, we often made follow-up queries that are not listed here to enable them to further elaborate on their experiences.

1. Are you currently in living in Turkey, and if so, in which city?
2. Are you a university student, or have you already finished your degree, or are you planning to pursue a college degree in the future?
3. What are your plans for the future?
4. How long have you been playing video games? Can we say that you are an enthusiastic gamer? When did you start streaming on Twitch? When and how did you first learn about the platform?
5. How often are you streaming on Twitch on a weekly and monthly basis? On average, how many hours are you spending on Twitch in a day, week and month?
6. Which social media platform are you using the most frequently? Is it Twitch, if not, how often do you use Twitch in comparison to other social media platforms?
7. Do you use Twitch for any other purpose than gaming? What are some of the essential usages of Twitch for you?
8. Have you ever considered taking part in other media venues, such TV and cinema, or are you exclusively interested in online streaming and gaming?
9. Can we see Twitch as a valuable source for socializing with like-minded individuals?
10. Would you agree with the statement that Twitch opens up a space allowing you to better express yourself, your feelings, and opinions?
11. Have you ever heard negative statements from people around you when they learned you are about to launch your streaming channel? What did they say? Have you heard anything that directly or indirectly indicate that this is not a suitable endeavor for you because of your gender?
12. Has your opinion of Twitch changed after you have started streaming?

13. About the demographics of your followers; on average, how old are they, and are your followers primarily women, men, or is it evenly distributed? Are they mostly the same people who follow you in other social media platforms?

14. Do you believe Twitch is a male-dominated platform?

15. What are the disadvantages of being a female streamer on Twitch?

16. Do you believe gender-based discrimination is wide-spread on Twitch Turkey? Have you felt like you are being treated in a differential manner because you are a woman? Have you ever experienced discrimination based on your gender identity?

17. Have you ever been derided for your gaming performance; do you believe women are more frequently slated in online gaming based on their gender?

18. Are there any differences between being a woman on Twitch and being a woman in off-screen spaces like school, the streets, or a coffeehouse?

19. What do you think about publicized incidents of sexual harassment and bullying against female Twitch streamers?

20. Do you believe that there is a connection between violence against women in the real world and incidences of online harassment?

21. Is there an aspect to streaming that you believe have empowered you?

22. Have your online streaming affected your off-screen life in any noticeable way? Have you undergone any positive or negative transformation in your thoughts and behavior as a result of streaming?

23. Can we argue that streaming allows women greater control over their self-representation compared to the depictions of women in Turkish popular culture, like Turkish TV series and movies?

24. Have you ever felt compelled to act, talk and dress in a particular way during your streaming? In other words, have you ever felt any direct and/or indirect societal pressure that has altered your online behavior?

25. Do you have any suggestions for women who plan to become an online streamer on Twitch?