

PRACTITIONER INSIGHTS INTO THE ETHICS OF LIVE STREAMING

by

Bohan Fan

*A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Business*

December 2024
Department of Marketing

ABSTRACT

The live streaming industry, worth USD 38.87 billion in 2022 and expected to grow to USD 256.56 billion by 2032 (CMI, 2023), has become a major force in digital media. However, its rapid growth has also raised significant ethical concerns, which as a digital marketing executive, I have witnessed first-hand. Streamers often use deceptive tactics, such as creating false urgency or faking their own popularity, to induce viewers into making impulsive purchases. Recent scandals, including misleading product promotions and fabricated claims by top streamers, further highlight the industry's ethical issues. There is an urgent need to address these issues that threaten trust, consumer well-being, and the industry's future.

Existing research on live streaming has primarily focused on consumer behaviours that enhance profitability, such as purchase intentions and gifting, while overlooking broader ethical challenges. Studies on live streaming ethics often address only one or two aspects, such as malicious selling and privacy violation, with little examination of the mechanisms driving unethical practices. To address these gaps, this study explored the ethical challenges of live streaming and the mechanisms that drive unethical behaviour using a qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews with 16 industry practitioners, including streamers, marketing managers, marketing agency owners, and e-commerce experts.

The findings revealed 19 distinct ethical issues in live streaming, which were systematically categorised into six types: deception, coercion, unhealthy streamer-viewer relationships, privacy violations, dissemination of harmful values, and exploitation of legal loopholes. These categories encompass a wide range of unethical practices, such as false advertising, fake testimonials, and forced endorsements. Additionally, the study identified three critical mechanisms driving these issues: asymmetric power relations between streamers and viewers; psychological manipulation of viewers; and insufficient regulatory frameworks. These mechanisms operate individually and interact in a cyclical manner, reinforcing one another and intensifying ethical challenges within the live streaming ecosystem.

This research makes several theoretical contributions. Firstly, it fills critical gaps in the marketing literature by offering a holistic examination of ethical challenges in live streaming. Secondly, it enriches existing research by identifying the underlying mechanisms contributing to unethical practices. Thirdly, it provides a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between these mechanisms, highlighting feedback loops that intensify unethical behaviours. Lastly, it expands the understanding of parasocial relationships by revealing their darker implications, demonstrating how these one-sided bonds can be weaponised for financial and emotional exploitation.

Practically, this study offers insights into the perspectives of practitioners within the industry. It highlights the need for stronger regulations and industry accountability in live streaming, including criminal penalties for unethical practices, mandatory background checks for streamers, and stricter content moderation. Platforms must enhance transparency and promote ethical conduct, while consumer education initiatives are essential to empower viewers and protect them from exploitation. Overall, this research lays a

foundation for future work on ethical live streaming, opening avenues for exploring ethical challenges from a global perspective, examining psychological mechanisms from a consumer perspective, and finally, investigating the overall well-being of streamers.

TABLE OF CONTENT

ABSTRACT	2
LIST OF TABLES:	7
LIST OF FIGURES	8
ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP	9
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	10
ETHICS APPROVAL	11
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	12
1.1 Introduction	12
1.2 Background	12
1.3 Motivation of the study	13
1.4 Statement of the problem	15
1.5 Research objectives	16
1.6 Research design	17
1.7 Significance of the study	17
1.8 Organisation of the thesis	18
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	19
2.1 Introduction	19
2.2 Ethics of marketing	19
2.3 The rise of live streaming	21
2.3.1 E-commerce live streaming and entertainment live streaming	21
2.3.2 Past research on live streaming	22
2.4 Overview of research on ethical considerations within live streaming	25
2.4.1 Ethical challenges in live streaming	28
2.4.2 Regulations in live streaming	28
2.4.3 Privacy concerns in live streaming	29
2.5 Parasocial relationships	30
2.6 Summary	31

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN	33
3.1 Introduction.....	33
3.2 Philosophical paradigm.....	33
3.3 Research methodology	34
3.4 Sampling and participant recruitment	35
3.5 Data collection	39
3.6 Data analysis.....	41
3.6.1 Trustworthiness of data.....	43
3.7 The researcher position	43
3.8 Ethical considerations	44
3.9 Summary.....	45
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....	46
4.1 Introduction.....	46
4.2 Ethical issues in live streaming	46
4.2.1 Deception.....	49
4.2.2 Coercion	49
4.2.3 Exploiting legal loopholes.....	50
4.2.4 Unhealthy streamer-viewer relationship.....	50
4.2.5 Privacy violation	50
4.2.6 Dissemination of incorrect values	51
4.3 Underlying mechanism of ethical issues.....	51
4.3.1 Symmetric power relations	52
4.3.2 Psychological manipulation.....	54
4.3.3 Insufficient regulatory frameworks.....	58
4.4 The interplay between the underlying mechanisms	61
4.4.1 Asymmetric power relations and psychological manipulation	61
4.4.2 Insufficient regulatory frameworks as an exacerbating factor.....	64
4.5 Summary.....	66
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS	68
5.1 Introduction.....	68
5.2 General discussion.....	68
5.2.1 Ethical issues	68
5.2.2 Underlying mechanisms and their interplay.....	70
5.3 Theoretical contributions.....	72

5.4 Managerial implications	73
5.5 Limitations of the study	74
5.6 Future research opportunities	75
REFERENCES.....	77
Appendix A: Ethics Approval.....	91
Appendix B: Participation Invitation	93
Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet.....	94
Appendix D: Consent Form	98
Appendix E: Interview Guide	99
Appendix F: Thematic Appreciation Test.....	102

LIST OF TABLES:

Table 1 An overview of research on ethical consideration within live streaming.....	26
Table 2 Interview participant profiles	37
Table 3 Themes and sub-themes addressing research question two	42
Table 4 The taxonomy of ethical issues in live streaming	46

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Thematic map..... 52

ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

AUT Master of Business

Bohan Fan

Student ID: 23191441

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by expressing my heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Dr Crystal Yap. Her guidance and support have been invaluable throughout this journey. Despite her busy schedule, she always found time to respond to my questions—sometimes even during her annual leave. Every time I sent her a draft, she would return it with detailed and thoughtful feedback, often much faster than I expected. Her belief in me and her encouragement kept me moving forward, and I truly could not have completed this thesis without her.

To my wife, thank you for being my greatest source of strength and comfort. You cared for me when I was too tired to look after myself, lifted me up when I felt defeated, and cheered me on when I doubted my abilities. Your love and support made even the hardest days bearable, and I couldn't have done this without you by my side.

I am also deeply thankful to my parents for supporting my decision to continue my academic journey. Your encouragement and trust in me gave me the confidence to take this path, and your constant support has been a cornerstone of my success.

A special thanks goes to all my research participants, who, despite their busy schedules, generously gave their time and patience to answer my questions. Their insights and openness made this study possible, and I am truly grateful for their contributions.

Finally, to everyone who has supported me in ways big or small—thank you. This achievement is not mine alone, and I am forever grateful for the kindness and support I have received along the way.

ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethics approval from Auckland University of Technology University Ethics Committee (AUTEC) was granted on 27st May2024, for a period of three years until 26 May 2027. The ethics application number is 24/121 (see Appendix A for Ethics Approval Letter).

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This thesis aims to study the ethical challenges in live streaming and the underlying mechanisms that drive its unethical practices. The opening section provides an overview of the live streaming landscape, highlighting recent scandals to contextualise the ethical challenges. This is followed by a detailed problem statement that identifies theoretical gaps and sets the foundation for the research. Next, the research aim and questions are presented, clarifying the study's objectives. The chapter then outlines the study's significant contributions, concluding with an overview of the thesis structure.

1.2 Background

Live streaming has become a dynamic medium in digital media, reshaping how people consume content, engage socially, and make purchases. Unlike traditional streaming media like radio and TV, live streaming enables viewers to access media content in real-time as it is being broadcast (Giertz et al., 2021). Additionally, live streaming offers more opportunities for audience interaction with content creators, or streamers (Gandolfi, 2016). In particular, live streaming allows streamers to showcase their activities to viewers in real-time through video or audio. Viewers can then respond to the streamer's actions or engage directly with them using the platform's real-time comment feature (Lim et al., 2020). Due to these two distinct characteristics, which set live streaming apart from traditional streaming media, scholars have also classified live streaming as a synchronous or interactive medium (Wohn et al., 2018). Live streaming originated among video game players and initially not widely adopted outside of the gaming world. Players used live streaming as a way to share their gameplay and communicate with one another (Li & Guo, 2021). However, it has since evolved beyond gaming, encompassing a wide range of content areas, including entertainment, education, and e-commerce. Today, individuals and businesses use live streaming to connect with audiences in real-time, whether through music performances, fitness classes, cooking demonstrations, product showcases, and other different formats. E-commerce live streaming has become increasingly popular, enabling streamers to showcase and endorse products to viewers, who can then purchase these items directly within the live broadcast or via an external purchase link (Liu et al., 2023).

According to Custom Market Insights (2023), the size of the live streaming market was \$38.87 billion in 2022 and is expected to hit around \$256.56 billion by 2032, thus poised to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 28% from 2023 to 2032. This live streaming trend is gaining momentum globally, with platforms like Twitch, YouTube Live, and TikTok Live in the West, alongside Douyin, Kuaishou, and Taobao Live in China. Twitch, for example, is currently the most popular live streaming platform in Europe and the United States (Sjöblom et al., 2019). It is a live streaming platform that offers gaming video content (GVC) and other forms of online entertainment. In 2022, there were around 33.2 million Twitch users in the United States and this figure is estimated to rise to 36.7 million by 2025 (Clement. 2023). In the past few years, the number of active streamers on Twitch grew from three million in 2018 to 7.59 million in mid-2023, with more newcomers and established broadcasters entering the playing

field each day (Clement, 2024). In China, live streaming has become an integral part of many people's daily lives, offering a space to discover products like clothing, food, and household essentials while engaging with influential streamers. Recent data shows that over 70.6% of Chinese internet users participate in live streaming (CNNIC, 2024). It has been projected that by 2025, the average online video viewing time will amount to around 241 minutes per day in China (Thomala, 2024). Moreover, the live streaming industry has generated a substantial number of job opportunities, becoming an attractive source of high income and drawing a large number of participants. A survey conducted in China revealed that 93% of live streamers earn over ¥4,500 per month. This figure is considerably higher than the national average per capita income of ¥2,682 (Chen et al., 2024). By the end of 2020, the total number of live streamer accounts in China had surpassed 130 million, with more than 43,000 new accounts created daily (INCIC, 2020).

In conclusion, live streaming has rapidly evolved into a major global industry, reshaping how audiences engage with content and driving significant economic growth. Yet, with this expansion comes a range of ethical issues that raise important concerns and require close scrutiny.

1.3 Motivation of the study

I have been working in the digital marketing industry as a digital marketing executive since 2017. Throughout my career, I have seen an increasing trend of brands leveraging live streaming to boost consumer engagement and broaden their reach. However, alongside this growth, I have also observed several ethical challenges emerging within the industry. For example, streamers may create a false sense of limited time or scarcity to pressure viewers into making quick purchasing decisions. This can involve claims of "limited stock", "only a few minutes left", or "exclusive deals" that are actually misleading, as the products may not be in short supply, or the offers may not be as time sensitive as portrayed. Additionally, some streamers deceive viewers about their popularity by hiring people to send fake comments. This tactic creates an illusion of high engagement and support, misleading genuine viewers into believing the streamer is popular, which may prompt them to mimic the behaviour by making purchases themselves. As a marketing executive, my experience primarily lies in e-commerce live streaming. However, I have also gained insights into entertainment live streaming through my cousin.

My cousin is one of the emerging live streamers in China. His primary content involves singing during broadcasts. Viewers can ask him to sing a specific song by sending virtual gifts which can be monetised. With thousands of followers, on some nights he is able to earn over ¥10,000 through virtual gifts alone, highlighting the lucrative opportunities available to successful streamers. Fascinated by his success, I sought to understand more about the inner workings of the entertainment live streaming world through having conversations with him. However, what he shared also exposed a darker side of the industry. He revealed that, beyond performing, many streamers carefully craft fake personas to win audience trust or empathy, for instance, posing as experts in specific fields or portraying themselves as individuals with tragic life stories.

“What you know is only what they want you to know” (Si, Live Streamer).

I could not help but agree with his statement and soon realised that many of these issues are deeply ingrained and pervasive throughout the industry. Recent scandals have further underscored the ethical challenges facing the live streaming industry. A recent example involves one of China's most influential live streamers, Crazy Little Brother Yang, or Crazy Xiaoyangge. He became embroiled in a controversy after promoting mooncakes as premium products from Hong Kong, despite the fact that they were manufactured in mainland China, specifically in Guangdong. The false advertising misled consumers, sparking public outrage and leading to investigations by the Hefei Market Supervision Administration. In response, Crazy Little Brother Yang's agency, Three Sheep Network, issued an apology and was fined ¥69 million, approximately \$9.8 million USD, for misleading advertisements and violating consumer trust (Feng, 2024).

Another notable scandal involved Xin Ba, a top e-commerce live streamer on Kuaishou, who came under fire for promoting bird's nest products that were later revealed to contain little more than sugar water (Yi, 2020). Consumers were led to believe they were purchasing a luxury health product, which damaged public trust in both the streamer and the platforms hosting such promotions. These two scandals highlighted the prevalence of deceptive marketing in live streaming, where exaggerated claims about product origin and quality are used to boost sales. They exposed how easy it is for streamers to exploit consumers with misleading product information. These two incidents received public attention because they involved top-tier streamers; however, countless similar cases likely occur daily, quietly eroding the integrity of the live streaming ecosystem and consumer trust. Even more concerning is that, despite receiving penalties, these streamers remain active, as the imposed fines are insignificant compared to the substantial profits they generate. In a recent live stream, Xin Ba achieved an astonishing GMV (Gross Merchandise Value) of ¥6.41086 billion, with a peak of 4.2666 million concurrent viewers and a total of 69.24 million views (Chen, 2024). His product presentation style remains unchanged, raising the question of whether false advertising may be still involved.

In addition to false advertising, several influencers, such as Wang Hongquan Xing, Baoyu Jiajie, and Bo Gongzi, faced criticism and account suspensions for flaunting extravagant lifestyles on social media platforms and during live streaming. Their content showcased luxury items, high-end properties, and lavish experiences, promoting materialistic values that clashed with societal efforts to discourage excessive consumerism, particularly in light of China's economic slowdown (Quan, 2024). This led to a government ban on "wealth-flaunting" behaviour, resulting in the removal or suspension of accounts promoting such content. Authorities expressed concern that the promotion of wealth and luxury through these influencers distorted social values and contributed to psychological imbalances among viewers, especially younger audiences facing economic challenges (Jett & Zhu, 2024). However, the effectiveness of these suspensions also remains questionable, as many streamers circumvent the penalties by appointing substitutes to continue their operations. These cases highlight the complex ethical challenges in live streaming, where the pursuit of profits can easily lead to deceptive practices, the manipulation of consumers, and the promotion of unhealthy societal values. These issues have significantly undermined consumer welfare by eroding trust between viewers and streamers. Consumers are often misled into making impulsive purchases based on false claims,

manipulated product information, or exaggerated personas. The lack of transparency not only results in financial losses for consumers but also fosters feelings of betrayal, frustration, and distrust toward the industry. Furthermore, repeated exposure to such deceptive practices can normalise unethical behaviour, diminishing consumers' ability to critically assess content and ultimately compromising informed decision making. These widespread ethical concerns have motivated me to delve deeper into the live streaming industry's practices and uncover the mechanisms behind these deceptive behaviours. Addressing these issues is essential to restore fairness and safeguard consumer interests. It is also vital for the long-term growth of live streaming as a viable and trustworthy platform, as consumer confidence and satisfaction are crucial for the industry's continued growth and success.

1.4 Statement of the problem

Although live streaming plays an increasingly central role in digital entertainment and e-commerce, there remains a significant gap in academic research addressing the ethical issues. Most studies have focused on consumer behaviours, and the primary research objectives have tended to revolve around identifying factors that promote certain behaviour, such as encouraging purchase intention (Meng et al., 2021; Lo et al., 2022; Shao., 2023; Fu, et al., 2023), fostering long-term customer loyalty (Hsu et al., 2020; Shi et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2024;), or driving continuous engagement through gifting (Li et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2023; Hou et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2024). The findings of these studies offer valuable insights that can enhance the profitability of live streaming platforms. However, they often overlook the negative consequences and potential ethical issues that may arise as a result. To establish a sustainable business model, it is crucial to comprehensively explore the current ethical issues in live streaming.

Recent research on ethical issues in live streaming is limited and primarily segmented into three areas: ethical challenges, regulatory issues, and privacy concerns. Studies on ethical challenges have highlighted issues such as malicious selling (Wu et al., 2022), product quality inconsistencies (Yu, 2023), selling counterfeits (Wang, 2024), and the negative impact on consumer mental health, such as loneliness and addiction (Wan & Wu, 2020). Much of this research, however, has had a narrow focus on one or two specific aspects only, lacking a holistic perspective, and primarily conducted from the live streaming viewers' standpoint, with limited insights from industry practitioners. Regulatory studies indicate that existing policies, particularly in regions like China, are inadequate (Xiao, 2024; Shen et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023; Shou et al., 2023), yet there has been a lack of thorough investigation into how streamers exploit the regulatory loopholes. Studies have highlighted privacy concerns from various perspectives, including bystanders (Wu et al., 2024), streamers (Wu et al., 2022), and viewers (Li, 2018), and have explored strategies and regulations related to privacy protection. However, they have not adequately addressed the reasons or motivations behind intentional privacy violations.

Furthermore, despite extensive efforts to identify relevant research, no studies to date have explored the mechanisms that underly ethical issues in live streaming; that is, the intricate processes and factors driving ethical issues within live streaming remain unexplored. This gap underscores the need for further investigation. Without a clear understanding of these mechanisms, it becomes challenging to diagnose the

primary causes and triggers of these unethical practices. This lack of insight makes it difficult to identify early warning signs or patterns of problematic behaviour. Consequently, unethical practices can persist unchecked, eroding consumer trust and encouraging exploitative behaviours. Additionally, the absence of this knowledge makes it more difficult to design comprehensive regulatory frameworks, leaving platforms, policymakers, and stakeholders without the necessary tools to promote accountability and responsible behaviour. The longer these issues remain unaddressed, the more likely it becomes for unethical norms to become entrenched within the live streaming ecosystem, further complicating future efforts to enforce ethical standards.

Lastly, to better understand the ethical issues and underlying mechanisms in live streaming, it is crucial to consider the role of parasocial relationships. These relationships, characterized by the illusion of a close, personal bond between viewers and streamers, are increasingly common in live streaming due to its real-time, interactive nature (Labrecque, 2024). Studies have shown that parasocial relationships enhance viewers' intentions to make purchases and send virtual gifts with monetary value (Kneisel & Sternadori, 2023; Ko, 2024). Yet, little attention has been given to whether these relationships have any negative implications. It is essential to explore the negative implications of parasocial relationships within the live streaming context and to understand how streamers may exploit these relationships for unethical purposes, as such practices can erode viewers' trust and adversely affect their well-being.

1.5 Research objectives

This research addresses the following objectives:

The first objective is to explore the ethical challenges present in live streaming. Rather than limiting the analysis to a specific type of live streaming, this research will adopt a holistic approach, investigating ethical challenges across various forms, including both e-commerce live streaming and entertainment live streaming. Through a comprehensive exploration, the study seeks to uncover as many ethical issues as possible, recognising that ethical concerns are not limited to financial transactions or deceptive sales tactics. In particular, this study aims to address broader ethical challenges that impact viewers' well-being. Additionally, this study will not be confined to any specific platform. By adopting this inclusive approach, the research aims to provide insights that reflect the diverse and interconnected nature of live streaming ecosystems, ensuring that the findings are applicable across different contexts and not biased by platform-specific factors. Moreover, departing from a focus on viewers' perspectives, this research will be conducted from the perspective of practitioners, including streamers, live streaming operation executives, marketing experts, e-commerce professionals, and business owners. Positioned at the core of the industry, these actors possess a unique understanding of its inner workings and can often identify issues that may go unnoticed by ordinary consumers. As the primary drivers of the industry, their perspectives are crucial to building a sustainable live streaming ecosystem. By taking this comprehensive approach, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the ethical landscape within live streaming.

The second objective is to uncover the underlying mechanisms that drive unethical behaviour in live streaming. A key aspect of this investigation will involve examining these mechanisms through the lens of parasocial relationship theory, which explores the one-sided emotional bonds that viewers develop with streamers. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant, as it will help to explain how viewers' perceived intimacy with streamers may lead to vulnerabilities that unethical practices can exploit.

To this end, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the ethical challenges across different forms of live streaming, including e-commerce and entertainment live streaming?

RQ2: What underlying mechanisms drive unethical practices in live streaming?

1.6 Research design

This research utilised qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interviews to explore the ethical issues in live streaming, along with their underlying mechanisms. Given the participants' diverse locations, data collection was conducted primarily online. The final sample consisted of 16 participants, including digital marketing managers, live streamers, e-commerce managers, and business owners. Both Qualitative content analysis and Thematic analysis will be employed to analyse the data.

1.7 Significance of the study

This study is likely to provide significant theoretical contributions. Firstly, it aims to extend the marketing literature on ethical challenges within the live streaming industry. It will undertake a comprehensive exploration of the ethical issues present in different types of live streaming from the practitioners' perspective. The findings will contribute to the discussion on live streaming ethics, providing a basis for future studies in this area. Without a holistic approach, the field risks a fragmented understanding, limiting the ability to identify patterns and relationships between various unethical practices.

Secondly, this study seeks to uncover the underlying mechanisms driving unethical practices. The findings will advance our understanding of the behavioural, psychological, and structural drivers of misconduct in live streaming. Understanding these mechanisms will clarify not only the 'what' but also the 'how' and 'why' of unethical issues. Specifically, the findings will shed light on behaviour patterns within digital ecosystems by exploring how weak regulatory frameworks in digital environments can enable, amplify, or obscure unethical practices, creating an ecosystem where such behaviours thrive. Additionally, the study will contribute to the understanding of consumer psychology by revealing how viewers' interactions and perceptions can be manipulated through unethical practices. Together, these insights will provide a foundation for more nuanced theoretical frameworks that address emerging phenomena in digital spaces, helping scholars and practitioners build more accurate, contemporary interpretations of ethical behaviour in rapidly evolving online environments.

Lastly, this study will add to the literature on parasocial relationships in live streaming. Previous studies on parasocial relationships have primarily focused on their positive implications, such as enhancing

source credibility (Gong & Li, 2017; Lou, 2022) or increasing levels of audience loyalty (Hu et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2024). This study will provide a different perspective by exploring the negative implications of this theory. The findings will provide valuable insights on how these relationships can be manipulated through unethical practices. With the growing influence of live streaming on younger, impressionable audiences, understanding these manipulative behaviours is becoming increasingly important.

From a managerial perspective, the study will offer practical insights that can help viewers, platforms, streamers, and regulators develop more effective strategies to mitigate unethical practices and promote sustainable growth in the industry. For streamers, the research will help them realise the ethical dilemmas they face in balancing financial success and audience engagement with transparency and trust. It will highlight the unethical practices that they should avoid in the future, encouraging streamers to adopt strategies that foster long-term viewer trust and sustainable growth. For viewers, this study's significance lies in its potential to empower viewers through greater awareness of these dynamics, helping them become more informed and cautious participants. The research also advocates for stronger consumer protections and educational initiatives, fostering healthier online interactions and reducing the risks of exploitation. For platforms, the findings will provide valuable insights into how their incentive structures and algorithms may unintentionally promote unethical behaviour. This knowledge can drive the development of more sustainable business models that prioritise ethical engagement over short-term profit. For policy makers, the findings will inform them about the gaps in existing regulation frameworks that allow unethical practices to persist in live streaming. These insights can guide the development of more comprehensive regulations to better protect viewers' mental and financial well-being.

1.8 Organisation of the thesis

The remainder of this thesis provides a detailed exploration of the ethical challenges present in live streaming, beginning with a comprehensive review of relevant literature. The literature review discusses the rise of live streaming as a significant force in digital media, examines the ethical considerations within marketing, and highlights the concept of parasocial relationships as a theoretical lens. It also identifies gaps in existing research, particularly regarding the perspectives of industry practitioners on ethical challenges. Following this, the methodology chapter outlines the research design, data collection process, and analytical techniques employed. The findings section presents key themes that emerged from the interviews. A thorough discussion follows, elaborating on the study's significance and outlining its theoretical and managerial implications. The thesis concludes by addressing the limitations of the study, offering recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This study investigates the ethical issues prevalent in live streaming by drawing on insights from industry practitioners, with a particular emphasis on identifying and analysing the underlying mechanisms that contribute to these ethical challenges. To provide a comprehensive foundation for this analysis, the chapter will first examine the broader ethical considerations within marketing practices, followed by an exploration of the rise of live streaming as a dominant force in digital marketing. The discussion will then critically assess current studies on ethics in digital marketing, highlighting notable research gaps. Finally, the concept of parasocial relationships will be introduced as a theoretical lens through which to analyse these ethical challenges, providing a robust framework for understanding the underlying dynamics.

2.2 Ethics of marketing

The concept of marketing ethics was first defined by Murphy and Laczniak (1993) as the systematic application of moral standards to marketing decisions, behaviours, and institutions. Their definition emphasises that marketing ethics apply to diverse decisions, including product safety, pricing strategies, sales tactics, content development, and other related areas. According to the authors, ethical considerations affect the behaviour of marketers at all levels, from the Chief Marketing Officer to entry-level interns, across a wide range of organisations. These organisations include small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), multinational corporations (MNCs), nonprofits (NFPs), and various nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). Marketing ethics focus on assessing marketing practices in terms of being morally right or wrong. However, in more recent work, the definition of marketing ethics has shifted towards promoting ethical ideals, highlighting the standards that marketers should strive to uphold:

Ethical marketing refers to practices that emphasize transparent, trustworthy, and responsible personal and/or organizational marketing policies and actions that exhibit integrity as well as fairness to consumers and other stakeholders. (Murphy, 2017, p. 2)

This definition assumes a greater level of ethical and socially responsible behaviour from marketers in their interactions with consumers and other stakeholders. However, in the context of a highly competitive market, the drive for higher profits, increased market share, and building dominance over competitors can lead marketers to continue engaging in unethical practices. The marketing field has faced criticism relating to various ethical issues, including issues over product liability, deceptive personal selling tactics, false advertising, product dumping, price gouging, the targeting of low-income consumers, and the use of foreign child labour (Dunfee et al., 1999; Lawrence et al., 2002; Laczniak, 1999; Lund, 2000). The social and economic consequences of unethical behaviour are too significant to be overlooked any longer (Wade, 2020). Therefore, the ethics of marketing has become an increasingly important topic, of interest at both academic and management levels.

One of the earliest literature reviews on Business ethics with a special focus on marketing ethics was conducted by Tsalikis and Fritzsche in 1989. They classified the literature into two sections: normative, which provides moral guidance, and empirical, which depicts the current situation. Although their study offers important insights, the classification is somewhat restrictive, and the chosen literature may not comprehensively have covered the entire field. Research on marketing ethics expanded in the early 1990s, with broader coverage of marketing issues and the establishment of a theoretical and empirical foundation for future studies in the field (Kamila & Jasrotia, 2024). Gaski (1999) reviewed recommendations on marketing ethics and placed them into two categories: 'obey the law' and 'act in your own self-interest'. He revealed that if marketers adhere to legal requirements while still acting in their own self-interest, their behaviour will remain ethical. However, this perspective has not reached a consensus among scholars. Smith (2001), for example, has a different opinion. He believes that while following the law is often necessary, it alone is not enough to ensure ethical behaviour. Some marketers may prioritise their own interests, exploiting legal loopholes rather than considering ethical standards. Additionally, the unethical actions of others can influence their own behaviour.

The discussion on marketing ethics has continued to grow. Whysall (2000) explored additional topics related to marketing ethics including environmental issues, health concerns, consumer sentiment, aiding the disadvantaged, privacy, and ethics in the supply chain. The study of Nill and Schibrowsky (2007) focused on concept-oriented studies in marketing ethics. The authors categorised the topics based on the functional areas of marketing (4Ps) which provided the basis for the study of Schlegelmilch & Öberseder (2010). After reviewing over 500 articles, they identified 18 topics relevant to marketing ethics. In addition to ethical issues related to the 4Ps, they also addressed topics such as issues related to decision making, consumers, vulnerable consumers, marketing research, education, social marketing, green marketing, law, the internet, religion, as well as codes and norms, corporate ethical decision making, and literature reviews. Within these topics, codes and norms and corporate ethical decision making were found to be the two dominant themes. A more recent review of marketing ethics was undertaken by Javalgi and Russel (2018) from the perspective of international marketing. Six topics were identified: culture and ethics, ethical problems and judgments, moral philosophies, deontological and teleological evaluation, marketing education, and corporate ethical values. In another recent review of marketing ethics, Yildirim et al. (2021) highlighted several topics studied between 2000 and 2020 that have gained prominence due to current unethical practices by marketers. These include greenwashing, product design and safety, socially controversial products, sexuality in advertising, and planned obsolescence. They further suggested that the scope of marketing ethics could be expanded by exploring additional areas such as digital marketing, social media marketing, and marketing management.

Over the years, therefore, numerous studies have extensively examined ethical issues across various areas of marketing. Researchers have explored these issues from multiple perspectives, offering insights into both normative and empirical frameworks for ethical marketing. However, after reviewing a wide range of studies, this research finds that there is a notable gap related to ethical issues in live streaming. Despite the growing popularity and influence of live streaming as a marketing and entertainment platform, there is

surprisingly little academic research that addresses the ethical challenges unique to this space. Given the rapid rise of live streaming, this research aims to address the ethical concerns emerging within this evolving digital landscape. In the next section, this study will explore the rise of live streaming.

2.3 The rise of live streaming

In recent years, live streaming has become a major player in the digital world, revolutionising the way individuals consume and interact with media. As a new form of social media, it originated from gamers sharing recorded gameplay videos. This method of uploading content has gradually evolved into real-time online sharing, allowing for immediate interaction between viewers and streamers, as well as among viewers themselves (Li & Guo, 2021). Fuelled by technological advancements, expanded internet access, and a rising demand for real-time interaction, more people are tuning in to live broadcasts online. Platforms such as Twitch, YouTube Live, TikTok, Instagram Live, and in China, Douyin, Kuaishou, and Taobao Live have provided a foundation for users to broadcast video content in real-time to a global audience. Twitch, one of the most popular live streaming platforms globally, generated \$ 3 billion in revenue in 2023 and had an average of 2.41 million concurrent viewers in 2023 (Iqbal, 2024). In China, over 150,000 hours of live streaming are watched by consumers each day (CNNIC, 2021). By mid-2024, the Chinese live streaming user base exceeded 777 million, constituting more than 70% of China's internet population (CNNIC, 2024).

2.3.1 E-commerce live streaming and entertainment live streaming

One of the most rapidly developing types of live streaming is e-commerce live streaming, which mixes live broadcasting with online shopping (Xu et al., 2020). Alibaba launched the live streaming e-commerce trend in 2016 with its Taobao Live platform, integrating entertainment and instant purchasing to create seamless, value-driven experiences for customers (Arora et al., 2021). Live streaming e-commerce integrates three key elements: video content, real-time interaction, and consumer engagement (Hou et al., 2020; Li et al., 2018). These elements work together to create a more immersive and interactive shopping experience compared to traditional text- or image-based campaigns. Video content allows products to be showcased in a dynamic and realistic manner, enabling viewers to observe product features closely as streamers demonstrate how items look, feel, or even smell in real-time (Chen & Liao, 2022). Real-time interaction enhances this experience by allowing viewers to ask questions or make requests, with streamers responding instantly, thus fostering a sense of immediacy and personalisation (Liao et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2020; Ming et al., 2021). Together, these elements drive consumer engagement, as the live demonstrations and immediate feedback help to build trust and involvement, making the purchasing experience more compelling and interactive. Moreover, the involvement of celebrities as hosts in live streams has significantly increased fan engagement and boosted sales, generating millions of views and substantial revenue (Qiu et al., 2021). As of 2024, China's e-commerce live streaming market has hit nearly ¥5 trillion (Statista, 2024). The number of users engaging in e-commerce live streaming has reached 526 million, reflecting a growth of 11.94 million since December 2022 (CNNIC, 2023). Beyond China, live streaming e-commerce is experiencing rapid expansion globally. In the U.S., live streaming e-commerce sales reached USD 50 billion in 2023, with projections indicating 36% growth over the next three years (Statista, 2024).

Another major type of live streaming is entertainment live streaming. In contrast to e-commerce live streaming, entertainment live streaming covers a broad range of formats and styles, including sports, variety shows, and concerts. These forms of entertainment live streaming have given rise to intellectual property rights in areas such as online literature, films, food, video games, and comics (Zhang, 2021). In an entertainment live streaming show, streamers perform various acts such as singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, and hosting talk shows. They also share personal knowledge and provide insights from their experiences (Lu et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2021). The real-time nature of live streaming allows viewers to interact with streamers directly by sending messages and virtual gifts. Viewers can request specific actions from the streamer, such as singing or dancing, and the streamer can respond immediately, creating a dynamic and engaging experience. In fact, a significant portion of live streaming revenue comes from streamers, who earn virtual gifts bought by viewers as a way to show appreciation for their performances.

There are two types of virtual gift-giving based on the nature of the gifts: free gifts and paid gifts. A free gift is a virtual item that viewers can send to a streamer without any cost. These gifts are designed to encourage basic interaction and engagement without monetary commitment. They may help increase the visibility of viewers' interactions but usually have a minimal impact on the streamer's earnings. On the other hand, a paid gift is a virtual item that viewers purchase with real money or in-app currency, which they can then send to a streamer. Paid virtual gifts usually appear as pictographs with colorful designs, such as flowers, cars, and carnivals, with prices ranging from as little as USD 0.01 to over USD 1,000. These virtual gifts carry monetary value, fulfilling the financial needs of both streamers and live streaming platforms (Wohn et al., 2018). In recent years, the monetisation of virtual gifts has seen substantial growth, particularly in the East-Asian live streaming market. For instance, in China, virtual gifts made up an impressive 80% of the total live streaming revenue (Dai, 2019). Huya, one of China's leading live streaming platforms, revealed that 95% of its revenue was derived from virtual gifts, while the remaining portion came from advertising and other services (Sun, 2018). Top-tier streamers can generate millions in revenue through virtual gifts. Notably, Feng Timo, a prominent live streamer on the Douyu platform, received over ¥9.3 million virtual gift from a single viewer (Zhang et al., 2019). Another well-known live streamer on Huya, known as "xuxubaobao", accumulated ¥20 million in virtual gifts (Shea, 2020, as cited in Hou et al., 2024). The substantial revenue generated by live streaming is compelling, with streamers continuously exploring new tactics to encourage viewers to send more gifts. However, this pursuit also raises significant concerns regarding ethical practices.

In summary, both e-commerce and entertainment live streaming have grown into dynamic, revenue-generating sectors that blend real-time interaction with high viewer engagement, underscoring the significance of this digital medium. As live streaming has continued to expand, it has become an increasingly prominent area of marketing research.

2.3.2 Past research on live streaming

The rapid growth of live streaming has attracted significant attention from scholars and researchers, leading to two major streams of research within the marketing literature. One stream of research mainly focuses on

viewers' engagement in live streaming. For example, Zhang et al. (2022) found that live streaming elements like active control, two-way communication, and synchronicity, along with technical features such as visibility and personalisation, can enhance trust between viewers and streamers, which in turn influences viewers' intention to continue engaging with the stream. Hu et al. (2017) explored the factors influencing audiences' intention to continue watching through a dual identification framework, which considers identification with both streamers and audience communities. Their findings indicate that audience identification with both streamers and other viewers is positively linked to their intention to keep watching. Liu et al. (2024) examined the impact of streamers' characteristics on viewer engagement. Their research revealed that traits such as trustworthiness, expertise, interaction, attractiveness, and uniqueness are positively correlated with the development of parasocial relationships among viewers, which in turn strengthens both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty toward the streamer's content. Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut (2020) and Leong et al. (2023) examined the perceived values of live streaming and how these values are associated with customer trust and engagement. Their findings demonstrate that symbolic value has a positive impact on customer trust, which subsequently builds customer engagement. Hu and Chaudhry (2020) investigated the influence of relational bonds between broadcasters and consumers on consumer engagement, suggesting that social, structural, and financial bonds enhance consumer engagement through the mediator of affective commitment. Together, these studies underscore the importance of trust, identification, and perceived value as common factors influencing viewer engagement in live streaming. However, a common limitation in this body of research is its focus on consumer perspectives, with research participants exclusively drawn from live streaming users rather than industry practitioners.

The other stream of research has primarily focused on the factors influencing viewers' consumption behaviour in live streaming, including purchasing intentions and virtual gift-giving activities. For purchase intention, prior studies (Zheng et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2022) have found that consumer engagement positively influences purchase intention in live streaming e-commerce. Social elements such as likes, chats, visits, and exposure time in live streaming have been shown to positively influence purchase intention (Addo, et al., 2021). Moreover, the streamers' characteristics can also influence consumers' purchase intention. For example, studies have revealed that the credibility, professionalism, attractiveness, and interactivity of live streamers positively influence impulsive buying behaviour (Sun et al., 2022; Dong et al., 2023; Lawrence & Meivitanli, 2023; Shao, 2024;). These factors help build trust and foster a deeper connection, which encourages impulsive purchasing decisions. Additionally, Dong et al. (2023) emphasise that key aspects of social presence, such as coexistence, communication, and emotional presence, significantly enhance impulsive consumption behaviour. Song et al. (2024) explored how streamers' self-presentation behaviour patterns influence consumers' purchase intentions. The results demonstrate that streamers' helpful and empathetic behaviours significantly enhance consumers' likelihood of making a purchase. Wang and Wang (2021) studied the influence of streamers' morality on purchase intention. The results showed that streamers' morality positively influences consumer identity, which subsequently influences consumer attitude and purchase intentions towards the products recommended by live streamers. Across these findings, trust and emotional connection emerge as key drivers influencing consumption in live streaming environments.

Zhang et al. (2024) examined the purchase intention from a viewer's value perspective. Their findings indicate that five out of six consumption values, namely functional, social, emotional, conditional, and self-gratification, significantly drive purchase intention. These values play a key role in shaping consumer behaviour and influencing their decision to make a purchase. In addition, streamer popularity has strengthened the influence of functional, social, emotional, and self-gratification values on purchase intention. This suggests that for more popular streamers, viewers are more likely to translate these perceived values into actual purchase intentions. Zhang and Zhang (2022) and Hao and Huang (2023) investigated the impact of time scarcity on purchase intention and found that it significantly increases impulsive buying behaviour, regardless of the product type. The sense of limited time encourages consumers to make faster, less deliberate purchasing decisions, aligning with the findings of Lo et al. (2022), who conducted a comprehensive study on the key drivers of impulsive buying in live streaming using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework. Their findings reveal that scarcity persuasion can trigger impulsive buying. Furthermore, they also found factors such as parasocial interaction, social contagion, vicarious experiences, and price perception significantly contribute to the urge to make impulsive purchases. The influence of parasocial relationships on purchase intention in live streaming has also attracted interest from other scholars. For example, Ko (2024) in his study identified that parasocial relationships increase viewers' intention to purchase the products sold by streamers. Rungrunangjit (2022) found that parasocial relationships have mediating effects on increasing purchase intention. Fu and Hsu (2023) found that parasocial interaction with co-viewers in live streaming plays a key role in driving impulsive purchases. By encouraging viewers to post comments, engage with "danmaku" (real-time scrolling comments), and share shopping experiences, the parasocial interaction between viewers increases, which in turn enhances shopping values and boosts the likelihood of impulsive buying. This line of research highlights the importance of parasocial relationships in live streaming, underscoring their significant role in shaping purchase intentions.

Parasocial relationships have also been found to have a strong positive correlation with gifting behaviour (Chen, 2021; Kneisel & Sternadori, 2023; Hou et al., 2024). In live streaming, the boundary between viewers and streamers becomes blurred, as direct interaction creates the perception of an authentic bond between them. Viewers often act more like fans or friends, offering virtual gifts as a form of support for their favourite streamers, rather than as customers who exchange gifts for specific performances (Wan et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2019; Kowert & Daniel, 2021). The interaction between streamers and viewers can help viewers cultivate bond-based attachment (Hu et al., 2017), while group interaction among viewer crowds encourages viewers to create identity-based attachment. Both bond-based and identity-based attachment can contribute to viewers' gifting behaviour (Wan et al., 2017, Zhang et al., 2024). As viewers send more gifts to streamers, parasocial relationships are further reinforced, creating a feedback loop where the strengthened bonds encourage further gifting, deepening the perceived connection between viewers and streamers.

Beyond parasocial relationships, several other factors have been shown to influence gifting behaviour. For instance, Luo et al. (2024) found that viewers are more likely to send gifts when they observe peer viewers engaging in gift-giving, suggesting that the social influence of peer interaction plays a key role.

Lin et al. (2021) highlighted that streamers' positive emotions during live streams, such as enthusiasm, joy, or excitement, can further encourage viewers to give gifts. Interestingly, Xi et al. (2024) expanded on this by showing that even negative emotions, such as sadness, can evoke sympathy and lead to increased gifting. Additionally, Lu et al. (2022) revealed that viewers' perceptions of streamers' attractiveness, perceived similarity, and the utilitarian and hedonic value they provide are all positively associated with the intention to gift. Their findings align with those of Wohn et al. (2018), who discovered that viewers send gifts to streamers for both intrinsic reasons, such as emotional attachment and interaction, and extrinsic reasons, including rewarding the broadcaster for entertainment received and encouraging the creation of future content.

Two observations can be derived from the review of these studies. Firstly, previous studies on live streaming have predominantly focused on the positive aspects of the medium, exploring various factors that drive viewer engagement, purchase intention, and gifting behaviour. Research has been centred on identifying how streamers can enhance consumer interaction and encourage monetary behaviours, such as purchasing products or sending virtual gifts, by leveraging elements like parasocial relationships, emotional engagement, and streamer characteristics. While these studies provide valuable insights for streamers and industry practitioners on how to maximise financial outcomes, they largely emphasise strategies to optimise engagement and revenue generation without critically addressing the potential consequences of these practices. This leads to the second observation: there is a notable lack of research on the negative or unethical practices within live streaming. Thus far, limited academic attention has been devoted to examining how streamers might exploit their influence over viewers, leading to practices that harm consumer well-being. This oversight raises concerns about the long-term viability of the industry, as unethical issues could burn viewer trust and damage the industry's reputation in the long run. The next section will address the current research on ethical considerations within live streaming.

2.4 Overview of research on ethical considerations within live streaming

The current body of research on ethical considerations in live streaming is still small. Although this is not intended to be an exhaustive or systematic literature review, it is essential to provide a broad overview of the research in this field. The focus of this study is ethical issues in live streaming; therefore, a targeted review was conducted to explore existing work to help build the rationale for this research. In the search for relevant articles, keywords such as “ethical issues”, “ethical problems”, “ethical challenges”, “ethical dilemmas”, “ethical considerations”, “ethical concerns”, “immoral activities”, and “live streaming ethics” were combined with terms including “live streaming”, “live streamers”, and “live broadcasting”. The search was specifically focused on the marketing context. Table 1 offers a summary of selected articles, highlighting key findings, methods, and research focus. As the table presents descriptive details, this section will concentrate on addressing the research gaps identified through the review.

Table 1 An overview of research on ethical consideration within live streaming

Literature Area	Research Focus	Reference	Key finding	Method	Research gap
Ethical challenges in live streaming	Malicious selling in e-commerce live streaming	Wu et al. (2022)	Identified 16 malicious selling strategies and found that platform designs enhanced these malicious selling strategies	Content analysis & interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predominantly focuses on problems in e-commerce live streaming, neglecting problems in other types of live streaming such as entertainment • Lack of holistic analysis of ethical issues in live streaming • Insufficient understanding of the impact of live streaming on consumer well-being • Limited understanding of the mechanisms behind the ethical issues • Majority of studies are from the viewers' perspective and lack practitioner insight
	Problems and strategies of e-commerce live streaming	Yu (2023)	Identified the problems and challenges of e-commerce live streaming on the Douyin platform in China, focusing on product quality inconsistency, content homogeneity, and live streaming regulation	Case study	
	Negative consequences of watching live streaming	Wan and Wu (2020)	Found that viewers' enjoyment of broadcasters was positively associated with their parasocial relationships with the broadcasters, which in turn led to increased loneliness and addiction among the viewers.	Online survey	
	Problem of selling counterfeits	Wang (2024)	Analysed the rights and obligations between subjects in live broadcast marketing	Case study	
	Sustainable development of live stream shopping	Gao (2023)	Identified solutions as follows: manufacturers should provide high-quality products; relevant laws and policies should be improved; greater supervision of tax payment is required; live streamers should strengthen rational guidance to consumers concerning their consumption	Review	
	Current situation of e-commerce live streaming in China	Yang (2023)	Identified problems of e-commerce live streaming related to the following: industry supervision, low-price promotion, younger consumer groups, and the efficiency of the whole industry chain	Review	
	Gender and relational labour in China's live streaming	Ye et al. (2023)	Found that the economy ambivalent intimacy, represents a deeper form of exploitation where female streamers are compelled to navigate the conflicting pressures of financial security, sexual desire, and morality	Interview	
	Trauma and live streaming viewing	Beall (2020)	Found that when watching a live stream, there is a risk of encountering traumatic	Book chapter	

			content. In such cases, it is recommended to resist morbid curiosity and refrain from sharing the content further.		
	The legal context: the occurrences, and the rationale of live streaming crimes	Beall (2020)	Found that while the creativity and autonomy of live streamers are highly valued, it is essential that their creative efforts are exercised in a socially responsible manner.	Book chapter	
Regulation on live streaming	Challenges for regulation	Xiao (2024)	Identified legal inconsistencies and gaps in live streaming as well as the issue of platform liabilities	Case study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited to conceptual or anecdotal discussion with no empirical verification • Limited to understanding how live streamers exploit regulation loopholes
	Development and regulatory trends of live streaming in China	Shen et al. (2023)	Examined the regulatory framework and government efforts in China's live streaming industry.	Conceptual	
	Evaluation of China's live streaming policy	Wang et al. (2024)	Found that the overall structure of policy tools in the live streaming e-commerce industry is unreasonable, and different types of policy tools are significantly diverse. The current effectiveness evaluation of relevant policy performance in the live streaming e-commerce industry is not excellent.	Content analysis (Secondary data)	
	The effect of government regulations on live streaming	Shou et al. (2023)	Found that strict government regulations can build trust in consumers of e-commerce live streaming by increasing the perceived benefits of restricting the behaviour of SMIs	Survey	
Privacy in live streaming	Bystanders' privacy	Wu et al. (2024)	Found that streamers cared about their bystanders' privacy and made privacy decisions largely based on their own assumptions. Current streaming platforms lacked features that helped streamers seamlessly manage their bystanders' privacy or that invited bystanders into their privacy decision making	Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predominantly focused on privacy concerns and management, while overlooking the reasons behind privacy violation • Limited understanding of the motivations behind intentional privacy leaks by live streamers
	Users' privacy	Li (2018)	Highlighted that participants had concerns about being streamed due to different factors, and adopted individual and collaborative strategies to cope with their concerns	Interview	

	Streamers' privacy	Wu et al. (2022)	Results showed that streamers had concerns and carefully managed their information disclosure based on whether the disclosure would enhance or weaken their attractiveness to the audience and whether it would disturb their interpersonal boundary with the audience	Interview	
--	--------------------	------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------	--

The current literature on ethical considerations in live streaming can be broadly divided into three key areas: ethical challenges in live streaming, regulation in live streaming, and privacy concerns. While these studies provide valuable insights, there are notable research gaps, especially regarding holistic analysis and practitioner perspectives. These gaps highlight the need for further exploration into the longevity of the industry and the protection of all stakeholders involved. The following sub-sections will cover each of these three key areas in detail.

2.4.1 Ethical challenges in live streaming

Several studies have focused on the unethical practices within live streaming. Wu et al. (2022), Yu (2023), Yang (2023), and Gao (2023) explored the problems specific to e-commerce live streaming, highlighting issues such as malicious selling, product quality inconsistency, selling counterfeits, and content homogeneity. Additionally, the study by Wan and Wu (2020) highlighted live streaming's negative emotional consequences for viewers, demonstrating that parasocial relationships with streamers can lead to loneliness and addiction. Beall (2020) discussed the negative effects on consumer well-being of live streaming traumatic content, emphasising that creating and sharing such content should be done in a socially responsible manner. These findings suggest that the immersive nature of live streaming may not only be financially exploitative but can also result in long-term mental health consequences for viewers. While these studies provide valuable insights, there are significant gaps in the literature. There is also a lack of a holistic analysis of ethical issues with appropriate categorisation, leaving an incomplete understanding of the broader landscape. Much of the research has identified only one or two issues in a single type live streaming, e.g. malicious selling in e-commerce live streaming, or traumatic content in entertainment live streaming. Furthermore, the impact of live streaming on consumer well-being has not been sufficiently explored, and the mechanisms underlying these ethical concerns remain poorly understood. Finally, most studies have been conducted from the perspective of viewers, with limited insight from streamers and other practitioners. This highlights the need for further research examining existing ethical issues in live streaming from the perspective of those directly involved. By employing a thorough and multi-faceted approach, such research would be able to shed light on the complexities of ethical concerns within the live streaming environment.

2.4.2 Regulations in live streaming

The second area of research focuses on the regulation of live streaming. Xiao (2024), Yu (2023), and Wang et al. (2024) critiqued the current policy landscape, noting that the existing regulations in China are inadequate and insufficient to ensure ethical practices in e-commerce live streaming. Their evaluation found that many

policy tools are either ineffective or poorly implemented, creating an environment where unethical behaviour can thrive. Shen et al. (2023) also examined the evolving regulatory framework in China, emphasising the government's role in addressing the industry's ethical issues. However, they pointed out that the industry will face challenges with regulatory compliance, user protection, and staying competitive. Platforms and creators must keep up with regulations, invest in safety measures, and continually innovate to meet users' evolving needs. Despite these findings, most research has remained at a surface level, lacking any in-depth examination of the relationship between regulatory insufficiencies and the persistence of unethical practices. A number of critical questions need further exploration, such as in what ways do live streamers exploit regulatory loopholes and what specific gaps in regulation continue to exist? Addressing these gaps is essential for future research.

2.4.3 Privacy concerns in live streaming

The third area of ethical consideration revolves around privacy issues for both streamers and viewers. Wu et al. (2024) examined bystander privacy, revealing that streamers care about the privacy rights of others who might unintentionally appear on camera; however, they often make privacy decisions based on their own assumptions. This study also found that current platforms lack features to manage bystanders' privacy effectively, which can lead to privacy violations during live broadcasts. Similarly, Li (2018) highlighted users' concerns about their privacy when participating in live streams, particularly when they are unaware of the factors influencing the collection and use of their personal data.

Streamers also face privacy-related challenges, as discussed by Wu et al. (2022), who found that many streamers are forced to carefully maintain a balance between transparency and personal boundaries. They must decide how much personal information to disclose without compromising their interpersonal connection with their audience or weakening their public persona. This raises ethical questions about the pressures placed on streamers to disclose personal information in order to maintain viewer engagement. However, despite the focus on privacy concerns, much of the research has primarily addressed how privacy is managed without delving into the reasons for these violations or exploring potential solutions. Moreover, most studies have failed to provide an in-depth understanding of how privacy protection mechanisms can be improved, which is a crucial gap given the growing prevalence of live streaming.

In addition to the previously mentioned research gaps, another significant gap in the literature is the lack of exploration of the underlying mechanisms responsible for ethical issues in live streaming and the interplay between these issues. Much of the existing research has identified individual problems, such as malicious selling or privacy violations, without delving into how these unethical behaviours are connected or how they emerge within the broader live streaming ecosystem. Furthermore, while parasocial relationships are frequently discussed as positively related to purchase intention and gifting, there has been little exploration of how these relationships might also contribute to ethical issues. Given the real-time interaction in live streaming, a one-sided relationship between streamers and viewers can easily develop. It is possible that this relationship may play a role in exacerbating unethical behaviours, such as emotional manipulation or exploitation. Exploring parasocial relationships and the potential ethical issues they create in live

streaming presents an important aspect for future research. This study seeks to address these gaps by using parasocial relationships as a theoretical background to better understand the ethical challenges in live streaming.

2.5 Parasocial relationships

The concept of parasocial relationships was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), with reference to the intimate connections that individuals form with media figures, such as celebrities and fictional characters, based on repeated encounters. Individuals may invest emotional energy, interest, and time into the relationship, while the media figure remains unaware of their existence. In contrast to other social relationships, parasocial relationship is a one-sided relationship (Kowert and Daniel, 2021; Aw and Labrecque, 2020; Labrecque, 2014; Zafar et al., 2020). Especially with traditional media, there is no mutual or two-way interaction between the viewer and the performer. The concept of a parasocial relationship in this context has received significant attention in traditional media research, particularly related to fictional television programmes, televised sports (Lee et al., 2018), movie characters (Daniel & Westerman, 2017), and video game characters (Song & Fox, 2016; Kowert, 2020a). Over time, with the rise of interactive media such as social networks and live streaming, the concept of parasocial relationships has been increasingly applied to understand online user behaviour. With functions like commenting or messaging, social media allows a two-way communication between viewers and media figures. Thus, the interactive and open nature of social media offers greater opportunities for forming parasocial relationships (Labrecque, 2014). Live streaming is a new form of social media that offers an enhanced sense of intimacy through various additional technical features. It blurs the boundary between the viewer and the streamer by offering the viewer real-time direct access to the streamer, creating the perception of an authentic connection (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). For instance, viewers can ask streamers questions in real-time during the live stream, and streamers can respond instantly. However, streamers are unable to engage with every interaction or build personal friendships with all of their viewers (Kim & Song, 2016). Live streaming has shifted the nature of a parasocial relationship from the classic one-sided relationship towards a “one-and-a-half” sided relationship (Kowert & Daniel, 2021).

With repeated exposure to a live streamer, many viewers begin to perceive their relationship as friendship (de Wit et al., 2020; Daniel et al., 2021) and often express sincere concern for the streamer’s well-being (Lim et al., 2020). This sense of connection frequently motivates viewers to continue watching, engaging, and offering virtual gifts as a gesture of support for their "perceived" friend. Labrecque (2014) found that there is a strong correlation between parasocial relationships and persuasiveness. During a live stream, if the streamer expresses interest in receiving virtual gifts, viewers with parasocial relationships are more likely to feel compelled to purchase these gifts to align with the streamer’s expectations. Through these activities, viewers also seek to affirm the illusion of friendship with the streamer (Hou et al., 2024). In addition, because of the perceived friendship, viewers are more likely to trust a streamer’s recommendations and view them as a trustworthy or credible resource for purchase information (Lee & Watkins 2016; Lou 2022). Lou and Yuan (2019) also identified a positive correlation between parasocial relationships and

followers' interest in products promoted by influencers. Similarly, as mentioned in section 2.3.2, scholars have already examined the likelihood that parasocial relationships increase viewers' intention to purchase the products sold by streamers (Ko, 2024; Rungrunangjit, 2022; Fu & Hsu, 2023).

Studies have suggested that streamers should focus on building strong parasocial relationships with consumers, which will lead to greater levels of loyalty (Hu et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2024), positive consumer purchase intention (Rungrunangjit, 2022), source credibility (Gong & Li, 2017; Lou, 2022). McLaughlin and Wohn (2021) examined the best methods for a streamer to encourage parasocial relationships, suggesting that these relationships are more likely to develop when the streamer is perceived as interpersonally attractive and engages with viewers, when the viewer experiences loneliness and/or extroversion, and when the viewer has followed the streamer for an extended period.

However, despite the rapid growth of studies on parasocial relationships in live streaming, the ethical implications of these relationships have received limited attention. While parasocial relationship can offer benefits and enhance consumer engagement, they may also present significant ethical challenges. Streamers can leverage parasocial relationship with viewers to promote products or ask for monetary contributions (Yang & Ha, 2021), which raises questions about transparency, consumer protection, and manipulation. When streamers position themselves as trustworthy friends or experts, viewers may be more likely to make purchases or provide financial support without critically evaluating the credibility of the streamers' endorsements (Shao, 2024). This exploitation of parasocial relationships can create ethical issues, particularly when influencers' motivations are concealed, or when vulnerable audiences are targeted. Streamers may exploit their viewers' emotional attachments by using manipulative tactics, such as fostering a false sense of intimacy or creating fabricated personas to elicit greater engagement and financial rewards. The lack of transparency regarding the true nature of the streamer-viewer relationship poses significant risks to consumers, particularly when viewers are unaware of the power asymmetries at play. This research fills this gap by exploring ethical issues in live streaming through the lens of parasocial relationship theory.

2.6 Summary

This literature review established the foundations for understanding ethical challenges in live streaming through the lens of parasocial relationship theory. It began with an overview of marketing ethics, emphasising the evolution of ethical standards in marketing and the need for ongoing research on ethical challenges across emerging platforms. The rise of live streaming was then discussed. Driven by technological advancements and real-time interaction, live streaming has rapidly emerged as a major force in digital media. The two key types of live streaming, e-commerce live streaming and entertainment live streaming, were firstly discussed, followed by a review of current research on the topic. It was found that studies have primarily focused on enhancing consumer interaction and generating financial outcomes, with little emphasis on ethical concerns. The next section reviewed current research on the ethical challenges in live streaming, emphasising the need for a more comprehensive study that explores various ethical issues, their underlying mechanisms, and the interplay between them. Lastly, parasocial relationships were explored as a theoretical lens. Current research on parasocial relationship has predominantly emphasised their positive

aspects, overlooking potential drawbacks, such as the exploitation of emotional bonds. This study aims to address all the above-mentioned gaps by using a qualitative research method. Chapter 3 will describe the methodology, methods, and procedures for data collection and analysis used in this study, discussing the qualitative approach employed to address the research aims and questions.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology adopted for this research, designed to address the research questions: “What are the ethical challenges across different forms of live streaming?” and “What underlying mechanisms drive unethical practices in live streaming?” A qualitative approach was chosen to enable a comprehensive exploration of these ethical challenges, allowing for an in-depth understanding of their complexity and underlying mechanisms. This approach provides insights that would be difficult to capture through quantitative methods alone.

This chapter begins by outlining the research methodology chosen to address the proposed research questions. Following this, it details the process of participant recruitment, the data collection procedures, the role of the researcher, and the steps involved in analysing and interpreting the data. The chapter concludes with an overview of the ethical considerations adhered to in conducting the research. Each of these aspects is discussed in the subsequent sections.

3.2 Philosophical paradigm

A paradigm refers to “a basic set of beliefs that guides action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). Setting a research paradigm is crucial because it establishes the foundation from which research is undertaken. It governs how researchers ask research questions and conduct the research (Davies & Fisher, 2018). To establish a robust research design, it is essential for researchers to select “a research paradigm that is congruent with their beliefs about the nature of reality” (Mills et al., 2006, p. 2). A research paradigm encompasses several foundational elements. The first element is ontology, which examines the nature of reality by asking, “What is reality?” (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 36). The research ontology guiding this study is relativist in nature. It holds that reality is inseparable from the subjective experience of it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ethical challenges and motivations for behaviour may be context-specific and perceived differently by each individual. This study focuses on capturing the diverse, intersubjective realities shaped by participants' perceptions, experiences, and interactions within the live-streaming environment. This ontological stance supports the study’s aim to explore diverse ethical issues from different viewpoints and experiences, acknowledging that each participant, whether streamer, marketing manager, or other practitioner, may perceive and define ethical practices differently.

The second element of the research paradigm is epistemology, which explores the nature of knowledge and poses the question, “What counts as knowledge?” (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 20). Given the complex, socially constructed nature of ethical perceptions in live streaming, a constructivist epistemology was adopted. Constructivism assumes that truth and meaning are not found in an external reality, rather, they are constructed through individuals' interactions with the world (Gray, 2022). For this study, constructivism indicates that understanding ethics in live streaming is not about uncovering a singular, objective truth. What is considered ‘ethical’ or ‘unethical’ is not a fixed truth but an interpretation shaped through social

interactions and constructed intersubjectively (Saunders et al., 2019). This approach allows for a context-sensitive examination of ethical challenges, focusing on subjective experiences and social context while prioritising participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Lastly, aligning with the relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology, an interpretivist theoretical perspective was adopted for this study. Unlike positivist approaches, which seek objective, generalisable results, interpretivism acknowledges that reality or truth is socially constructed (Cohen & Grabtree, 2006). Knowledge is shaped by historical, temporal, cultural, and subjective circumstances (Benoliel, 1996). Interpretivism acknowledges that ethical understandings are deeply influenced by the live streaming context and are therefore situational and variable. This theoretical perspective allows this study to identify and examine the diverse ethical issues within live streaming environments, and the mechanisms behind them, from the viewpoint of participants. Adopting an interpretivist perspective also brings a critical sensitivity to the role of the researcher, who must navigate the complexities of interpreting participants' comments. In this context, I am not a neutral observer but an active participant in meaning-making (Davies & Fisher, 2018), where bias and subjectivity are embraced as part of the interpretive process. This reflexivity requires me to be transparent about my own assumptions and perspectives, recognising that these will inevitably shape the study's outcomes. Thus, the interpretivist approach adds depth to the study by allowing it to reveal not only the multiple realities of ethical challenges in live streaming but also the structural and contextual influences that inform those realities. Overall, the relativist ontology, constructivist epistemology, and interpretivist perspective adopted in this research provide a cohesive framework for understanding the complex, socially constructed nature of ethical challenges in live streaming.

3.3 Research methodology

Consistent with the research paradigm, this study adopted a qualitative approach to examine the complex nature of ethical challenges in live streaming. The significance of conducting qualitative research lies in its emphasis on in-depth exploration and understanding of individuals' lived experiences and the meanings attributed to these experiences from their own viewpoints (Denzin & Lincoln, 1996). It is a process of examining an experience occurring within natural or real-world settings to interpret its intricate and holistic nature (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The unique perspectives from stories and experiences shared in qualitative research contribute valuable insights into the phenomenon or event under study (Pope & Mays, 2020). Such research is frequently exploratory, aiming to generate novel insights into areas where knowledge is limited or to investigate issues from alternative perspectives (Swedberg, 2020). Through qualitative methods, this study was able to gather rich, descriptive data that reflect the personal insights of practitioners related to the ethical issues in live streaming, which quantitative methods might overlook. Capturing the subjective perspectives and experiences of participants helps in identifying the diverse ethical challenges in live streaming. Moreover, by engaging directly with participants, qualitative research enables a deeper understanding of the potential values, beliefs, or social dynamics shaping the practices in live streaming. This methodology is thus necessary to uncover and identify the mechanisms that contribute to ethical issues in the digital landscape.

This research employed semi-structured interviews as the research method to gather detailed, flexible, and context-rich data directly from participants. Semi-structured interviews do not have to adhere to specific questions but must remain aligned with a predefined interview guide (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). They are particularly well-suited for exploring complex topics, as they give participants the flexibility to discuss their issues and concerns in depth, while also enabling researchers to pose questions central to the study (Liammputtong, 2020). This format further "allows the conversation to flow more naturally, creating space for unexpected directions" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 113). The predefined interview guide ensured consistency across interviews, enabling a focused examination of a specific topic. The interview guide will be discussed in more detail in section 3.5. This research method ultimately supports the study's goal of uncovering both common and unique perspectives on ethical challenges, helping to inform a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms behind unethical practices in this emerging field.

3.4 Sampling and participant recruitment

Effective qualitative researchers engage in purposive sampling, intentionally selecting data that align with the research questions, objectives, and aims of the project (Campbell et al., 2020). Purposive sampling was employed in this study to select participants with relevant knowledge and expertise in live streaming, as this experience is essential for providing informed perspectives on the ethical challenges under investigation. Additionally, snowball sampling was used to complement purposive sampling, with initial participants invited to refer other individuals who met the study's inclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria required that participants had a minimum of two years of experience working within the social media marketing industry, ensuring that they possessed substantial insight into its practices and challenges. Participants also needed to be above 20 years of age to ensure they had attained a level of maturity and professional experience conducive to the study's aims. No specific criteria were set for gender, ethnicity, or other socio-demographic characteristics, allowing for a broad range of voices and perspectives. Thus, sample diversity was enhanced by incorporating insights from participants with varied contexts and backgrounds in live streaming.

To recruit participants, I created a participation invitation (see Appendix B), detailing the participant criteria, the study's purpose, and key information, and distributed it across my social media platforms – LinkedIn, WeChat, Instagram, and Douyin. These platforms were chosen to maximise visibility within the live streaming community and connect with individuals who met the inclusion criteria. Interested individuals were invited to contact me voluntarily. Upon expressing interest, they were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix C) and Consent Form (see Appendix D), which outline the study's objectives, procedures, confidentiality assurances, and their rights as participants. This process ensured that participants were fully informed about the study and understood their involvement before proceeding.

Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, defined as the point where similar responses to interview questions are repeatedly observed and no new information or themes emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This approach ensured that the findings are comprehensive and accurately reflect

the experiences within the live streaming field. Overall, 16 participants with a minimum of two years of experience in the digital marketing industry were recruited for interviews. Table 2 shows the profile of participants in this research.

Table 2 Interview participant profiles

Name	Age	Occupation	Number of years of digital marketing work experience	Background
Michelle	31	E-Commerce Manager	7	Michelle has over seven years of experience in the e-commerce industry, working with a global makeup brand. A key focus of her current role involves e-commerce live streaming, which has become an integral part of her professional responsibilities.
Raffel	32	Head Of China Marketing	8	Raffel has extensive experience in marketing, specialising in assisting European brands to enter the Chinese market. He is currently based in Italy, where he lives and works.
Rose	26	Channel Sales Manager	3	Since graduating, Rose has been working at a social media app company specialising in food content. The company operates its own e-commerce store and live streaming channel, which are used both to sell products and to educate viewers on cooking techniques.
Kate	27	Senior Operation Executive	5	Kate works at a company that operates a major social media platform in China. In her current role, she is responsible for managing the live streaming activities of celebrities on the platform.
Sandy	32	Influencer/ CEO Of Media & Marketing Agency	10	Sandy is the founder of a media and marketing agency with four branches across different countries. In addition to her entrepreneurial success, she is also a prominent influencer, boasting nearly 20 million followers.
Si	28	Entertainment Live Streamer	3	Si is an entertainment live streamer with over 5,000 followers and is known for delivering singing performances during his live streams.
Star	29	Entertainment Live Streamer	3	Star is an entertainment live streamer who performs singing during his live broadcasts. With over 10,000 followers, he has a dedicated audience, some of whom send him high-value virtual gifts.
Jessica	26	Sales Manager	4	Jessica is actively involved in her family business, focusing on sales. She introduced live streaming as an innovative strategy to help grow and expand the business.
Kathy	32	Live Streaming Operation Executive	4	Kathy has over four years of experience in the live streaming industry. Her primary responsibilities include preparing live streaming content, supporting streamers during broadcasts by ensuring products are handed to them promptly, and addressing any changes or concerns in real time.
Max	36	Live Streaming Operation Executive	5	Max is Kathy's colleague and shares similar job responsibilities, including preparing live streaming content and supporting streamers during broadcasts. Additionally, Max is occasionally involved in product selection, helping to choose popular items to feature and sell during live streams.
Becky	32	E-commerce Live Streamer	3	Becky is an educational live streamer who focuses on discussing topics related to university entrance exam applications during her live streams. She also sells relevant books and study materials as part of her live streaming sessions.
Zha	30	E-commerce Live Streamer	2	Zha previously worked for a major live streaming channel in China that sold a wide range of products, including food, clothing, and books. His live streams attracted impressive audiences, with viewership numbers occasionally exceeding 100,000.

Joan	32	Live Streaming Researcher	3	Joan has conducted extensive research on live streaming, which has given her a strong understanding of the industry.
Doudou	31	Entertainment Live Streamer	2	Doudou is a new live streamer who is currently striving to grow her follower base. During her live streams, she typically engages with her audience through conversations and occasionally performs songs for them.
Kelly	32	Marketing Manager	7	Kelly has extensive experience working in marketing agencies and inbound marketing departments. She possesses a deep understanding of the marketing landscape in China and views live streaming as a key channel within contemporary marketing strategies.
Ben	36	Marketing Agency Owner	10	Ben is the founder of a marketing agency in South Africa and currently resides in Auckland. His professional background has provided him with a deep understanding of marketing practices in Western markets.
Amy	32	E-commerce Live Streamer	5	Amy is an e-commerce live streamer affiliated with an MCN (Multi-Channel Network) company. She collaborates with various live streaming platforms to promote and sell a wide range of products, including makeup, fashion items, and electronics.

3.5 Data collection

Among the 16 interviews conducted for this study, 14 were held online via Tencent Meeting, as the participants were based in China. The remaining two interviews were conducted face-to-face in Auckland. Of the interviews, 15 were conducted in Mandarin, and one was conducted in English. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, and all interviews were audio-recorded for transcription purposes, with prior consent from participants. For the Mandarin interviews, a bilingual researcher with expertise in both Mandarin and English conducted the forward translations to ensure accuracy and cultural sensitivity. To further enhance the reliability of the translations, a back-translation process was undertaken for selected portions of the transcripts. This involved translating the English text back into Mandarin and comparing it to the original to verify consistency and preserve the intended meaning (Chen & Boore, 2010). Translation of qualitative data involves more than just converting language: it requires capturing the cultural context in which the data were collected (McKenna, 2022). Therefore, particular care was taken to address cultural nuances, ensuring that the transcripts accurately represented the participants' perspectives. After translation and transcription, any identifiable details were anonymised to protect participant confidentiality. The original recordings were promptly deleted from the interview platform, and the final transcriptions were securely stored in a password-protected OneDrive account.

The interviews began with general icebreaker questions to establish rapport and create a comfortable environment for the participants. These initial questions focused on their professional background, such as the length of their experience in the live streaming industry and the nature of their work. Participants were also invited to provide a brief overview of the live streaming industry from their perspective. These opening discussions helped to build trust and allowed participants to ease into the interview process. Once participants were more comfortable, the discussion transitioned to the core topics. Firstly, participants were asked to share their views on ethical standards in live streaming, including the significance of these standards and how they influence trust and credibility among viewers. Then, they were encouraged to share examples of unethical practices they had observed, discuss the motivations that might drive such practices, and identify the mechanisms behind them. Probing questions included, "How do you think the relationship between live streamers and their followers impacts ethical practices?", "In your opinion, how do viewer expectations or demands influence unethical practices?", and "Can you discuss any regulatory frameworks or industry guidelines addressing unethical issues in live streaming?" These questions were used to explore participants' perspectives on the dynamics between streamers and viewers, the role of viewer expectations, platform features, and the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks. The questions aimed to uncover not only the individual and organisational factors but also the systemic and structural mechanisms that contribute to unethical practices in the live streaming industry. The interview guide can be found in Appendix E.

To encourage participants to share their opinions openly while minimising the risk of desirability bias (Kubacki & Siemieniako, 2017), several projective techniques were employed. First, a construction projective technique, specifically the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), was integrated into the interview process. A construction projective technique usually involves asking participants to create a story or describe

a scenario based on stimulus concepts (Kubacki & Siemieniako, 2017). In this study, the TAT involved presenting participants with selected images (see Appendix F) depicting various live streaming scenarios. Participants were asked to describe what they believed was happening in the scene, focusing on the interactions between the streamer and the audience. Specific prompts included questions such as, “How do you think the streamer will introduce the product to viewers in this scenario?” and “How do you think the streamer interacts with the viewers during this live stream?” This approach encouraged participants to project their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences onto the hypothetical scenarios, providing insights into their understanding of industry practices without directly questioning their own behaviours. By analysing how participants interpreted the images, it was possible to uncover implicit attitudes and assumptions about live streaming dynamics, including potential ethical or unethical practices. Incorporating this projective technique enriched the data by delving into meanings that extended beyond explicitly expressed associations, emotions, attitudes, and perceptions, offering insight into both the conscious and unconscious inner world of the research participants (Pich & Dean, 2015).

A second projective technique – third-person projection – was used to mitigate desirability bias (Fisher, 1993). Participants were encouraged to reflect on the behaviours or practices of others in the industry rather than their own. For example, questions included, “Have you seen other streamers or companies adopt practices that you think are unethical?” and “What do you think motivates someone in this industry to act in certain ways?” This indirect questioning approach allowed participants to “describe their own feelings behind a façade of impersonality” (Simon & Simon, 1975, p. 586). It reduced the pressure to self-disclose and allowed participants to explore sensitive topics without feeling personally implicated. It also helped uncover industry norms and systemic factors that might contribute to unethical practices.

Lastly, active listening was also a crucial projective technique used during the interviews. The interviewer maintained a neutral tone and demonstrated attentiveness by using verbal affirmations such as, “I see” and “Thank you for sharing.” These cues reassured participants that their views were valued and encouraged them to elaborate further. Probing questions were tailored to elicit participants' responses, allowing for deeper exploration of specific topics without imposing preconceived notions. Moreover, the interviewer avoided offering personal opinions or judgments to ensure that participants felt comfortable expressing their honest thoughts without fear of being evaluated.

To address potential desirability bias, participants were reminded at the beginning of the interview that there were no right or wrong answers, and the focus was on their unique insights and experiences. Anonymity and confidentiality were also emphasised to foster a sense of security, ensuring that participants understood their responses would not be attributed to them personally. These techniques collectively created a supportive and open environment that facilitated genuine dialogue while maintaining the integrity of the data collected.

3.6 Data analysis

The data collected through interviews were analysed using a hybrid approach of qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. This approach has been leveraged in previous research to address complex topics. For example, Rusk et al. (2015) utilised this method to explore the components of appreciative functioning. Similarly, Bell and Deighton-Smith (2024) used this approach to examine constructions of fitness motivation in Instagram posts tagged "#fitspiration" and drew comparisons to posts from 2014. In this study, this hybrid approach was chosen for its suitability in addressing the two distinct research questions, allowing for both descriptive analysis and deeper interpretative insights. The first research question, "What are the ethical challenges across different forms of live streaming?", required a descriptive analysis of the data. To address this, qualitative content analysis was employed. According to Sandelowski (2000), qualitative content analysis is the ideal approach in descriptive qualitative research. It is a systematic method for identifying and describing meanings within various types of text (Morgan, 1993; Kohlbacher, 2005). It focuses on identifying categories or themes that both summarise the dataset and highlight its most significant elements (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Researchers may describe coding in qualitative content analysis as theory-driven and deductive, or as data-driven and inductive, or as a combination of both approaches (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). This study employed a combined approach to effectively identify all the ethical issues present in the data.

The analysis began with an initial immersion in the data to develop a comprehensive understanding. I listened to the audio recordings and carefully reviewed the transcriptions multiple times to become familiar with the content. Notes were taken during this process to capture initial impressions and recurring patterns. This step ensured that I was thoroughly engaged with the data before beginning formal coding. Next, I systematically coded the data by identifying meaningful units of text that described unethical practices or challenges in live streaming. Each code captured a distinct ethical issue, resulting in the identification of 19 issues, such as false testimonials, fake persona, sexual relationship, and materialism. After identifying the codes, all transcripts were reviewed again to ensure that all aspects of the ethical issues were thoroughly addressed (Burnard, 1991). After the open coding, these ethical issues were categorised into six broader categories: deception, coercion, unhealthy audience–streamer relationships, privacy violations, the dissemination of incorrect values, and the exploitation of legal loopholes. Each category was carefully defined to ensure it was homogenous and externally heterogeneous, which means no data overlapped between categories or fit into more than one group (Krippendorff, 2004; Patton, 2002). The categorisation process involved constant comparison to ensure consistency and coherence across the data. Any overlaps or ambiguities were resolved through iterative refinement, supported by frequent revisits to the raw data for validation. By categorising the data in this manner, the analysis provided a structured understanding of the ethical issues in live streaming.

Addressing the second research question, "What underlying mechanisms drive unethical practices in live streaming?", required a more interpretative approach with a focus on uncovering latent content. To achieve this, thematic analysis with an inductive approach was employed. According to Braun and Clarke

(2006), thematic analysis at the latent level moves beyond the surface meaning of the data to explore the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptual frameworks that shape or influence their semantic content. In the context of this study, this approach was essential for uncovering the deeper mechanisms driving unethical practices in live streaming. This study conducted thematic analysis following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The initial step of thematic analysis involved immersing myself in the data, a process that was carried out concurrently with the qualitative content analysis for research question one. In the second step, I systematically coded the data by highlighting meaningful text that captured insights into unethical practices and their mechanisms. This included both explicit and latent content, such as greedy customers, exploitation of empathy, celebrity streamers, and regulation gaps. Next, the initial codes were organised into categories by examining relationships and patterns among them, which were then further refined into potential themes and sub-themes. At this stage, I identified three overarching themes: Insufficient Regulatory Frameworks, Empowered Streamers, and Psychological Manipulation. Each theme represented a distinct mechanism driving unethical practices. Sub-themes were also developed to provide further granularity, for example, Inadequate Oversight and Regulatory Loopholes under Insufficient Regulatory Frameworks. In step four, the themes and sub-themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency. I revisited the coded data to confirm that each theme was supported by sufficient evidence and distinct from the others. Additionally, I also ensured that the themes accurately represented the data and aligned with the research question. For example, I carefully distinguished between emotional manipulation, which involves exploiting feelings such as empathy or urgency, and behavioural manipulation which focuses on triggering specific actions through incentives or rewards. Step five was about defining and naming themes. During this step, I changed the theme name Empowered streamers to Asymmetric power relations as it better captured the imbalanced power dynamic between streamers and audiences. The last step involved synthesising the findings into a coherent narrative. Table 3 presents the final themes and sub-themes.

Table 3 Themes and sub-themes addressing research question two

Theme	Sub-themes	Description
Insufficient regulatory frameworks	Inadequate oversight	Lack of comprehensive monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to address unethical practices
	Regulatory loopholes	Gaps and inconsistencies in existing regulations that enable unethical behaviours to persist
Asymmetric power relations	Celebrity status	The elevated position of certain streamers influencing power dynamics
	Platform empowerment	Platform structures and functions amplifying the authority of streamers
Psychological manipulation	Emotional manipulation	Exploitation of emotions such as empathy or urgency to influence behaviour
	Cognitive manipulation	Distortion of perceptions through misleading information or testimonials
	Behavioural manipulation	Strategies designed to drive impulsive actions by viewers.

The dual analysis enabled a comprehensive understanding of the ethical issues in live streaming. For research question one, the focus on categorising ethical challenges provided a clear descriptive foundation. For research question two, the deeper exploration of latent content offered insights into the mechanisms driving these behaviours. Together, these analyses ensured a holistic and detailed interpretation of the data, contributing to a broader understanding of the complex dynamics within the live streaming industry.

3.6.1 Trustworthiness of data

Establishing trustworthiness is a critical component of qualitative research, ensuring the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Rolfe, 2006). In this study, several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the data, including triangulation, member checking, and peer examination (Bengtsson, 2016). These techniques helped to ensure that the data collection and analysis processes were robust, transparent, and reflective of participants' perspectives.

Triangulation was achieved by incorporating multiple data collection methods (Denzin, 1978), such as semi-structured interviews and the TAT. This approach allowed for the validation of findings through cross-verification of data from different sources (Maxwell, 2013). For instance, insights gathered from participants' narratives during interviews were compared with their responses to hypothetical live streaming scenarios presented in the TAT. This method enhances credibility and quality by addressing concerns that a study's findings may be merely the result of reliance on a single method (Patton, 2015).

Member checking or respondent validation was another key technique used to ensure credibility. After the initial analysis, participants were invited to review summaries of their interviews to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. This process provided participants with an opportunity to clarify or expand on their statements, ensuring that their perspectives were accurately represented (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Moreover, it also helped with identifying and addressing any biases or misinterpretations on my part (Maxwell, 2013).

Additionally, peer review/examination was conducted throughout the research process to ensure dependability and confirmability. I engaged in regular discussions with supervisors to critically reflect on the data, interpretations, and emerging themes. These peer examination sessions aided in identifying gaps and potential biases, refining the analysis, and ensuring alignment with the research objectives. By integrating these techniques, the study maintained a rigorous and transparent approach, strengthening the reliability and validity of the findings.

3.7 The researcher position

My prior working experience in the marketing industry played a significant role in shaping my position as an "insider" in this study. This background provided me with a deeper understanding of the live streaming field and allowed me to connect with participants on a professional level. Respondents may have perceived me as sympathetic to their experiences, as I shared familiarity with the challenges and dynamics of their industry. Such shared understanding was able to foster trust, encouraging participants to share their experiences more

openly and authentically, as highlighted by De Tona (2006). My professional knowledge also enabled me to identify and utilise helpful and informative resources, enhancing the depth and relevance of the study.

Additionally, my cultural background and language skills further shaped the researcher–participant relationship which was characterised by trust, collaboration, and shared understanding. As someone who is fluent in Mandarin and familiar with the cultural norms and practices of the participants, I could communicate effectively and navigate cultural subtleties during the interviews. When conducting research, participants may be more comfortable discussing sensitive topics or providing candid insights when they perceive me as someone who understands their context. This relationship enables a deeper level of engagement and co-interpretation of the phenomenon being studied, as trust and mutuality of purpose are critical for meaningful insights (Manning, 1997; Burr, 2015).

Being an insider also comes with the responsibility of maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process. Reflexivity refers to a researcher’s intentional effort to critically reflect on their own reactions to participants and the way the research narrative is constructed. It involves recognising and addressing how personal beliefs, contextual factors, and situational dynamics may influence the research process and findings. By maintaining awareness of their position and role within the study, researchers can better understand and account for their impact on the data and its interpretation (Mason, 1996; Porter, 1993) and eventually, enhance the accuracy of the research and the credibility of the findings (Cutcliffe, 2003). While my professional and cultural familiarity was able to facilitate access to the “field” and strengthen the quality of data collection, it remains essential to be aware of potential biases that may arise from this position. I am committed to critically reflecting on my assumptions and interpretations to ensure that my role enhances, rather than limits, the objectivity and validity of the findings. Furthermore, strategies such as member checking, peer review, and maintaining a reflective journal are employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis.

3.8 Ethical considerations

This research was conducted in strict accordance with the guidelines of the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study, ensuring that they were fully informed about the research's purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. AUTEK’s guidelines were followed to uphold the principles of ethical research, including respect for participants, minimisation of harm, and fairness throughout the research process (Auckland University of Technology, n.d.). Before participation, all participants were provided with a detailed Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix C) outlining the study’s purpose, procedures, and their rights. Participants were also required to sign a Consent Form (see Appendix D) to confirm their voluntary agreement to participate after being fully informed of the study’s objectives and potential risks. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence, and their privacy and confidentiality were protected through anonymisation of data and secure storage practices. This process ensured that participants had a clear understanding of the research and their role within it, promoting informed consent and transparency.

Anonymity and confidentiality were rigorously maintained throughout the study. Identifiable details such as names, locations, or specific organisational affiliations were anonymised during transcription to protect participants' privacy. All collected data were securely stored in a password-protected OneDrive account, accessible only to my supervisor and me. Furthermore, interview recordings were deleted immediately after transcription. These measures ensured that participants' identities were safeguarded, and their contributions remained confidential. The ethical approach taken in this study reflects a commitment to respecting and protecting the rights and well-being of all participants, ensuring the integrity and credibility of the research process.

3.9 Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research methodology employed in this study. By adopting a qualitative approach, grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, the study explores the complexity of ethical challenges within the live streaming industry. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed as the primary data collection method. This approach resulted in the collection of rich, detailed data while enabling participants to share their views openly. Projective techniques, such as the Thematic Apperception Test and third-person projection, were used to avoid social desirability bias. The data analysis process, utilizing a hybrid approach of qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis, addressed the research questions by categorising ethical challenges and uncovering the underlying mechanisms driving unethical practices. The chapter also highlighted the measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness and ethics of the study, reinforcing the credibility and reliability of the findings. The following chapter will present the findings of the qualitative study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the ethical issues present in live streaming from the perspective of industry practitioners, with a focus on uncovering the underlying mechanisms. To achieve this, in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 professionals, including experts in social media and e-commerce as well as live streamers. Through a thematic analysis and interpretation of the data, key themes related to the research questions were identified. This section will present these emergent themes, supported by selected excerpts from the interviews to enhance understanding and validate the interpreted findings.

This chapter presents the results in three main sections. The first section addresses the ethical issues in live streaming, categorising them into six major types: deception, coercion, unhealthy audience-streamer relationships, privacy violations, the dissemination of incorrect values, and the exploitation of legal loopholes. Within each category, various unethical activities are identified and analysed. The second section explores the underlying mechanisms of these ethical issues, a topic that has been largely unexplored in previous literature. Key contributing factors include asymmetrical power relations, psychological manipulation, and insufficient regulatory frameworks. The third section examines the interplay between these mechanisms, highlighting the interplay between asymmetrical power relations and psychological manipulation as well as how insufficient regulatory frameworks exacerbate these two mechanisms.

4.2 Ethical issues in live streaming

The content analysis of the interview transcripts revealed 19 ethical issues. The participants discussed ethical issues in both e-commerce live streaming and entertainment live streaming. This study categorised the 19 ethical issues into six types: deception, coercion, unhealthy audience-streamer relationships, privacy violations, the dissemination of incorrect values, and the exploitation of legal loopholes. Table 4 presents the six categories of ethical issues, along with descriptions of each of the 19 issues.

Table 4 The taxonomy of ethical issues in live streaming

Category	Ethical issues	Description	Quote
Deception	False advertising	Promoting products or services with inflated or inaccurate claims to enhance their perceived value and appeal	<i>“There's also the example of Xinba's bird's nest incident, where the product was essentially sugar water, but it was advertised as bird's nest. The bird's nest content in that product was practically zero”</i> (Michelle, E-commerce Manager).
	Censored comments and feedback	Selectively highlighting positive feedback, suppressing negative remarks, or fabricating comments to create a more favourable impression of the product or service	<i>“If you think that this viewer is being unreasonable or their comments conflict with what you're saying, then you shouldn't engage with them. In such cases, you or your operational team can choose to block or mute them”</i> (Zha, Live Streamer).
	Unclear promotions mechanism	Offering fake or exaggerated discounts, giveaways, or special	<i>“They'll say things like 'buy one, get eight' to suggest that if you purchase</i>

		offers to entice viewers into making purchases	<i>one item, you'll receive eight additional items. For example, if you buy a jar of peanut butter, the extra items might be something insignificant, like a spoon or a few bags—basically things that don't matter much. They use these gimmicks to mislead customers into thinking they're getting a better deal</i> (Rose, Channel Sales Manager).
	Product quality inconsistency	Inconsistency between the quality of products showcased by streamers and the actual items received by consumers	<i>"The reason why the return rate for women's clothing in Douyin live streams is so high is because the clothes shown in the live stream often look completely different from the ones you actually receive"</i> (Sandy, influencer & CEO of Media and Marketing agency).
	Fake testimonials	Using fake reviews or testimonials to endorse products or services, misleading viewers about their effectiveness or popularity	<i>"They might, for example, purchase certificates through third parties and then alter some details. This is something I've encountered in my actual work, and it does happen"</i> (Sandy, influencer & CEO of Media and Marketing agency).
	Fake urgency	Deceiving views that the product is scarce or being sold out or the discount will expire soon	<i>"For example, they will say there are only a few minutes or a few orders left, and that once the stream ends, the gifts will no longer be available. They want to create the impression that once these items are gone, they're gone for good. However, in reality, from the business operations side, there is still plenty of stock; they're just creating a false sense of urgency for consumers"</i> (Michelle, E-commerce Manager)
	False viewer engagement	Deceiving views about the popularity of the streamer by using a "water army" to send fake virtual gifts or comments	<i>"We have targets to meet, and if you don't reach your target, you have to pay out of your own pocket to hire someone to send you virtual gifts, so that others think your live stream is very popular. Once you generate that buzz and create this illusion, other people might start sending gifts as well."</i> (Si, Live Streamer)
	Fake persona	Deceiving views with a fake persona to gain trust, affection, or empathy	<i>"Actually, every streamer, including myself, has their own fake persona. I also have a persona—being a down-and-out former rich second generation and struggling to live a new life"</i> (Star, Live Streamer)".
Coercion	Forced subscription	Forcing viewers to subscribe to the streamers or join the streamers' fan group to earn extra information or rewards	<i>"If you want to participate in the lucky draw in the live stream, you have to join the fan club. To join the fan club, you must pay first by sending a virtual gift. Only by paying to join the fan club can you participate in the lucky draw for the gift bag"</i> (Kate, Senior Operation Executive).
	Forced endorsement	Forcing viewers to send virtual gifts to the streamer or sharing the streamer with others to earn extra information or rewards	<i>"Based on the amount spent on virtual gifts or shopping, viewers are assigned different levels, each offering its own badge and benefits. This drives some</i>

			<i>viewers to keep spending in order to reach higher levels and earn better rewards” (Kate, Senior Operation Executive).</i>
Exploiting legal loopholes	Sexual connotation	Having content or behaviour that implies or directly suggests sexual themes or intentions	<i>“So, it's sexual connotation, not explicit pornography, but it relies on things like men's desire for sex to attract viewers and generate income” (Kate, Senior Operation Executive).</i>
	Infringement	Selling counterfeit or pirated products or using unauthorised content	<i>“It's a very common phenomenon. What about those super cheap Nike and Adidas products on live streams? They claim to be authentic, but in reality, most of them are fake. There's no way they could offer such big discounts” (Star, Live Streamer).</i>
	Money laundering	Collaborating with viewers to disguise the origins of illegally obtained money by funnelling it through sending gifts	<i>“For example, some people even use live streaming to launder money by forming a cooperative relationship with the streamer. They send virtual gifts as a way to 'clean' the money, and then later, offline, they get the money back from the streamer. Both the streamer and the platform take a cut from this process” (Si, Live Streamer).</i>
Unhealthy streamer-viewer relationship	Sugar dating	Using live streaming to facilitate a relationship with one or multiple viewers where financial support or gifts are exchanged for companionship and affection	<i>“In this industry if you want to make more money, most streamers establish a sort of 'sugar relationship', where they emotionally manipulate viewers. They make them feel obligated by saying, 'If you like me, and this is my job, then you have to support me; you have to send me gifts” (Star, Live Streamer).</i>
	Sexual relationship	Engaging in sexual interactions with viewers, often as a result of financial transactions or emotional manipulation	<i>“When a fan spends a certain amount on you, they start expecting something in return. For example, my top fan set a limit of 100,000 RMB. Once she spends 100,000 RMB on me, I have to engage in a sexual relationship with her in order to maintain our previous relationship” (Star, Live Streamer).</i>
Privacy violation	Doxxing	Intentionally disclosing the personal information of celebrities, other streamers, or viewers to generate traffic	<i>“There are many live streams that focus on celebrity gossip, and some even reveal things like celebrities' private information. This draws a lot of viewers because people are naturally curious about these things” (Jessica, Sales Manager).</i>
Dissemination of incorrect values	Homogenous beauty	Promoting homogenous beauty by constantly using thin, tall, and fair-skinned models to present products	<i>“In live streams, they always choose models who are tall and skinny. For example, Zara or & Other Stories always select models who are so thin that their legs look like bamboo sticks in front of the camera. However, most consumers actually have more average body types” (Sandy, influencer & CEO of Media and Marketing Agency).</i>
	Materialism	Promoting materialism by showing off luxury goods, expensive cars, or fancy houses	<i>“Showing off wealth can definitely harm people's values because many will start to think, 'We all have the same 24 hours in a day. If we're all</i>

			<i>working equally hard, why do you have so much more money than I do? Why can't I achieve the same level of wealth as you?' This can lead to feelings of resentment towards the wealthy or a sense of psychological imbalance” (Sandy, influencer & CEO of Media and Marketing agency).</i>
	Toxic value-based lessons	Selling lessons that promote incorrect values, such as how to raise an elite child or become a model wife	<i>“I've noticed that a lot of these types of live streams are actually engaging in gaslighting tactics with their viewers, essentially creating anxiety. This includes many of those that teach you how to raise children, making parents feel like if they don't enroll in this lesson and learn more about what they should do, their children will fall behind right from the start” (Kate, Senior Operation Executive).</i>

4.2.1 Deception

In the live streaming industry, deception appears to be a pervasive challenge, where multiple forms of immoral tactics are employed to enhance sales and engagement. Participants emphasised that streamers frequently mislead their audiences by presenting exaggerated claims and fabricated testimonials about products and manipulating feedback mechanisms to create a distorted perception of popularity and product quality. These deceptive actions undermine trust between streamers and viewers, as consumers are misled into believing in inflated claims or value propositions that do not reflect reality, and this false sense of reality often pushes viewers into impulsive purchasing decisions.

Additionally, deception extends beyond misleading viewers' perception to the manipulation of viewers' emotions. The use of fake personas, where streamers craft exaggerated or entirely false identities, creates emotional connections based on a false foundation. Participants reported that streamers often use emotional manipulation to win over viewers, encouraging them to make purchases or send virtual gifts under the mask of supporting a trusted individual. Moreover, the practice of creating false urgency, by suggesting limited-time offers or scarce products, further exemplifies how deception is woven into streamers' marketing tactics. By creating the tension, streamers encourage impulsive buying behaviour, prompting viewers to act quickly to secure limited offers or products. These combined strategies contribute to an ecosystem where viewers are frequently unaware of the extent to which their emotions are being manipulated for profit. Collectively, these forms of deception create a marketplace where trust and authenticity are severely compromised.

4.2.2 Coercion

Coercion in live streaming revolves around the pressure streamers apply to viewers, forcing them to engage in transactions or actions that they may not have otherwise participated in voluntarily. One key example of this is the practice of forced subscriptions or endorsements, where streamers force viewers to subscribe to fan groups, send virtual gifts, or share the streamer's content to access exclusive rewards. This tactic plays on

viewers' desire for connection and inclusion, leading them to engage in financial transactions that benefit the streamers. Coercion in live streaming raises important ethical concerns regarding consent and autonomy.

4.2.3 Exploiting legal loopholes

The exploitation of legal loopholes is a critical area of concern in live streaming, particularly given the rapid evolution of the digital landscape and the lag in corresponding regulations. Participants observed that streamers frequently operate in grey areas of the law and regulations, taking advantage of insufficient oversight to engage in ethically questionable practices. One prominent issue is the selling of counterfeit or pirated goods. Participants noted that platforms are often slow to regulate or remove counterfeit products, allowing streamers to continue selling unauthorised items without consequence. This exploitation not only harms consumers who receive low quality or illegitimate products but also undermines intellectual property rights and fair competition.

Another common legal loophole exploited by streamers is the sexualisation of content, where streamers incorporate suggestive behaviour or themes into their streams to attract viewers without explicitly violating platform guidelines. While such content skirts the boundaries of what is permissible, it often promotes unhealthy or exploitative dynamics, particularly when combined with the emotional manipulation seen in other categories.

Further, streamers may collaborate with viewers in money-laundering schemes by manipulating transactions, such as purchasing virtual gifts that are cycled back to the original sender through multiple accounts to obscure the true source of the funds. Live streaming platforms, with their high volumes of microtransactions and relatively limited oversight, offer a convenient channel for "cleaning" illicit money, effectively integrating it into the legitimate financial system.

4.2.4 Unhealthy streamer-viewer relationship

The nature of relationships between streamers and their viewers is another critical ethical issue, particularly when these interactions become exploitative or manipulative. Participants observed that some streamers use live streaming as a platform to engage in sugar dating or sexual relationships with their viewers, blurring the boundaries between entertainment and personal interaction. These relationships often involve financial exchanges, where viewers provide monetary support or expensive virtual gifts in return for intimacy, companionship, or other favours from the streamer. Such interactions reflect a form of commodification of relationships that raises serious ethical concerns, especially when viewers are manipulated into providing financial support under the pretence of personal connection.

4.2.5 Privacy violation

Privacy violations in live streaming, particularly in the form of doxxing, are a growing ethical issue where personal information is exposed without consent for attention, attraction, or retaliation. Doxxing, where individuals' private information is intentionally disclosed, has serious consequences, including harassment, threats, and reputational damage. Streamers or viewers often engage in these actions to generate controversy

or increase engagement, weaponising personal information to harm others. During the interview with Jessica, she shared how streamers intentionally disclose other streamers' personal information, encouraging their fans to go to the targeted streamer's location. Such violations not only harm the safety and well-being of individuals but also destroy the trust within the live streaming community, creating an environment of fear and vulnerability.

4.2.6 Dissemination of incorrect values

The dissemination of incorrect or harmful values in live streaming is another critical ethical issue, as streamers often promote unrealistic or damaging ideals to their audiences. Common examples include the reinforcement of homogenous beauty standards, materialism, and toxic societal values, such as elitism or superficial success. Streamers who consistently showcase luxury lifestyles, emphasise narrow beauty ideals, or sell “lessons” on how to conform to outdated social norms contribute to the normalisation of harmful standards. These messages can deeply affect viewers, particularly impressionable audiences, who internalise these values as aspirational or normative.

The ethical implications of promoting these distorted values are far-reaching, as streamers hold significant influence over their audiences. The repeated exposure to such ideals can perpetuate exclusionary standards, reinforcing societal divisions based on appearance, wealth, or status. Streamers, in their role as influential figures, bear responsibility for the content and values they disseminate, yet often fail to acknowledge the long-term consequences of their messaging. This raises questions about the broader social impact of live streaming as a cultural medium and the need for greater ethical awareness among streamers regarding the values they promote to their viewers.

4.3 Underlying mechanism of ethical issues

The rapidly evolving realm of live streaming has not only transformed entertainment and e-commerce but also introduced a host of ethical challenges that undermine the integrity of digital interactions. Previous sections have detailed a range of ethical issues prevalent in live streaming, which are critical not only for their immediate impact but also for the broader implications they hold for digital media ethics.

This section builds on the identified ethical concerns by delving into the systemic mechanisms that underlie and perpetuate these issues. Specifically, it explores three fundamental mechanisms: asymmetric power relations, psychological manipulation, and insufficient regulatory frameworks. Each of these mechanisms contributes uniquely to the ethical landscape of live streaming, facilitating behaviours and practices that can harm individuals and degrade the quality of digital discourse. Figure 1 presents the three fundamental mechanisms along with their associated factors. It also highlights the interplay between these

mechanisms, which will be further examined in section 4.4.

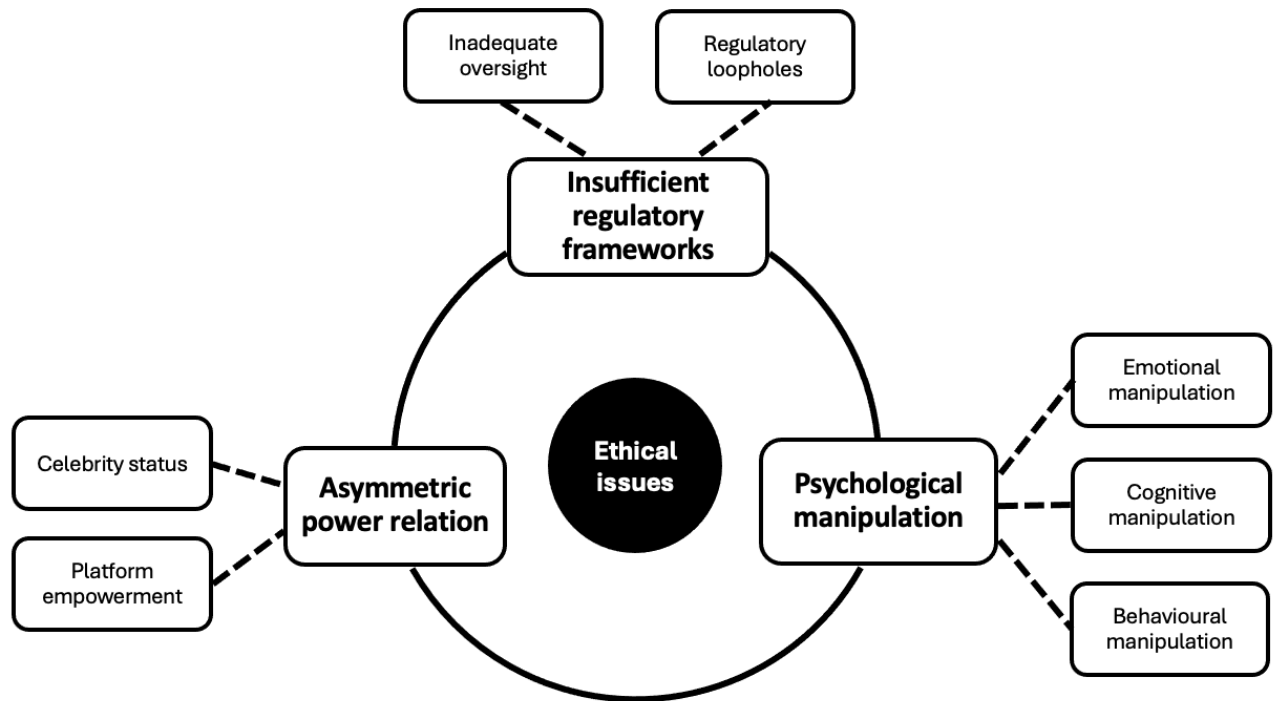


Figure 1 Thematic map

4.3.1 Symmetric power relations

Asymmetric power relations between streamers and viewers are one of the fundamental mechanisms driving ethical issues in live streaming. These power imbalances, where streamers often hold significantly more power than viewers, arise primarily from platform empowerment and the celebrity status of streamers. Both factors significantly enhance the influence streamers have over their audiences, skewing the dynamics between them in favour of those broadcasting rather than those watching.

Platform empowerment

In live streaming environments, platforms play a crucial role in empowering streamers by offering the option to purchase traffic or visibility. Many live streaming platforms allow streamers to invest in paid traffic promotion, enabling them to pay for more exposure and attract a larger audience. By investing more money, streamers can artificially increase the number of viewers in their live streams, which in turn boosts their position in the platform's popularity rankings. As streamers climb higher in these rankings, their visibility increases even further, attracting more viewers and creating a feedback loop of fake popularity generated by financial investment.

This inflated popularity has a direct impact on consumer behaviour. Viewers tend to trust streamers who rank higher, assuming that their popularity equates to credibility and authority. This was testified by one of the interview participants, Kathy, Live Streaming Operation Executive, who stated:

There are also live streaming online viewer rankings, which show which streamer is currently ranked first, second, third, etc. Generally, streams that are ranked higher tend to attract more viewers. Many

fans, including myself, will check out these streams and often place orders in these higher-ranked live streaming rooms.

This perceived trustworthiness makes viewers more likely to follow, engage, and purchase products featured in the live streams. Streamers, aware of this dynamic, can exploit it to manipulate viewer behaviour, using their elevated status to further influence purchasing decisions and engagement, all stemming from the initial investment in paid traffic.

The various tools and functions that platforms offer to streamers can further empower them with control and influence over their audience. Platforms give streamers the ability to block certain users or delete comments. For example, during the interview with Zha and Becky, Live Streamers, they both explained that streamers might delete comments that are genuine but inconsistent with their narratives, or block viewers who speak the truth or critique their content. This selective control over the interaction within their streams allows streamers to manipulate their audience's perceptions, effectively shaping the flow to present only what they want their viewers to see.

To summarise, the concept of platform empowerment reveals how live streaming platforms provide streamers with tools to artificially increase their visibility and control their audience, often at the cost of transparency and authenticity. By enabling streamers to purchase traffic and manipulate viewer engagement, platforms create an environment where inflated popularity becomes a marker of credibility, directly influencing consumer behaviour. This phenomenon of manufactured popularity can also help streams to achieve celebrity status, leveraging their elevated positions to gain even greater influence over their audiences.

Celebrity status

Celebrity status in live streaming refers to the level of fame and influence a live streamer achieves within the platform and among their audience. This status is often marked by a significant following, high viewer engagement, and the ability to impact the behaviours of viewers. Such celebrity status often leads to a power imbalance between the streamer and their audience, with viewers identifying as fans. The connection between a streamer and their viewers is similar to a "celebrity–fan relationship" (Hu et al., 2017, p. 603). A "fan" is described as someone who dedicates time and effort to engaging with or reflecting on a media work, object, or individual (Fiske, 1992). In the context of live streaming, the unique real-time interaction feature enhances the likelihood of viewers becoming fans and forming parasocial relationships with streamers. This celebrity worship and one-sided relationship can result in viewers feeling compelled to spend money or time in hopes of gaining a streamer's attention or approval. The following excerpt from an interview further illustrates this: "*Actually, many people have this mentality that because they constantly watch someone's live streaming, they become a fan of that streamer and they feel obligated to support them.*" (Rose, Channel Sales Manager)

In the context of live stream shopping, Park and Lin (2020) found that internet celebrities influence Chinese consumers' purchase intentions. Celebrity streamers are often seen as knowledgeable or credible

sources within their niche, whether it is fashion, technology, or lifestyle. This perceived expertise gives them authority, allowing them to shape viewers' opinions and preferences. Viewers, who typically have less information or expertise, rely heavily on streamers' recommendations, trusting that the products or brands endorsed are of high quality or aligned with their needs. When viewers perceive streamers as experts in specific areas, they are more likely to continue watching the live streams and seek their advice (Chen & Lin, 2018, as cited in Zhang et al., 2022). In this study, Raffel, Head of China Marketing, revealed that:

Many brands collaborate with celebrity streamers to benefit from their endorsements, similar to traditional celebrity endorsements. This allows brands to later leverage the streamer's fame to increase product sales in their own live streaming sessions.

In live streaming, celebrity status grants streamers significant influence over their audience. Viewers often trust celebrity streamers as credible sources and rely heavily on their recommendations. Moreover, similar to celebrity worship, viewers may develop parasocial relationship with celebrity streamers, enabling the streamers to further exploit their trust and emotional investment through psychological manipulation.

4.3.2 Psychological manipulation

Psychological manipulation serves as another foundational mechanism underlying many of the ethical issues. In the context of live streaming, it is deeply interconnected with a parasocial relationship, a one-sided relationship where one party feels a strong emotional connection to another party, the media figure, despite there being little to no actual reciprocal interaction (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). In livestreaming, these relationships are intensified by the interactive nature of the platform. A viewer can comment, send gifts, and receive direct responses from the streamer, which creates an illusion of intimacy and personal connection (Wohn & Freeman, 2020). However, the relationship remains inherently one-sided, with the viewer often feeling a stronger connection than the streamer, who interacts with many viewers simultaneously. By exploiting the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural vulnerabilities of viewers, streamers can engage in deceptive, coercive, and exploitative practices that are difficult for viewers to recognise and resist.

Emotional manipulation

Streamers often engage in behaviours that evoke strong emotional responses from viewers, such as creating fabricated personal stories and expressing exaggerated gratitude for viewer support during their streams. These actions are designed to make viewers feel special and connected, reinforcing the parasocial relationship. For example, a streamer might repeatedly thank individual viewers by name for their gifts, making those viewers feel recognised and appreciated. This fosters trust in the streamer's intentions, strengthens a sense of belonging, and reduces the feeling of distance between the viewer and streamer (Edwards et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2014). As a result, viewers may engage more by spending additional time watching, sending virtual gifts, or making purchases, believing they are supporting a "friend" or someone who genuinely cares about them. Raffel, Head of China Marketing, explained the following:

In a livestream, viewers are immediately given the opportunity to interact with the streamer in a two-way communication, almost like having a friend on the other side of the screen. They develop a liking for this person and a sense of identification with them. I think more than half of the viewers who buy something do so because the streamer recommended it. Because it's them, they think, I can give it a try as well.

To further manipulate consumers, some streamers take extra steps to reinforce the bond with their viewers. They may spend additional time and effort engaging with viewers even offline, through private messages or exclusive content. In an interview, Star expressed willingness to devote significant time and effort to interacting with his highest-spending viewers: *“I need to maintain my relationship with those viewers. Since they've given me gifts, I have to keep the connection going. For example, by saying good morning and good night every day, and occasionally sending them updates about my daily life”* (Star, Live Streamer). This deeper level of interaction can blur the lines between a parasocial and a real relationship, leading to situations where the streamer asks for more financial support. Over time, these dynamics can evolve into unhealthy relationships, such as sugar dating or a sexual relationship, where the viewer feels even more compelled to provide financial support in exchange for continued attention or affection from the streamer.

Another tactic that streamers use to create emotional connection with viewers is empathy. When streamers exaggerate or fabricate their vulnerability, such as admitting to feeling overwhelmed, struggling with personal issues, or expressing fear about the future, it humanises them and makes viewers feel empathy for them. Emotional empathy consists of affective responses that are focused on others' emotional states (Chakrabarti & Baron-Cohen, 2006), encourages altruistic behaviour towards others, and facilitates social bonding (Smith, 2006). A previous study found that empathy positively influences parasocial relationships (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). By making viewers feel like they are helping someone in need, streamers can manipulate them into taking actions they might not otherwise consider. The following excerpt from Star's interview illustrates how he and his colleague use fake personas to gain empathy:

Actually, every streamer, including myself, has their own fake persona. I also have a persona—being a down-and-out former rich second generation and struggling to live a new life. I use this persona to gain empathy or affection from some fans. Many of my colleagues especially like to pretend to be poor, creating a particularly tragic background. (Star, Live Streamer)

Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO) is also a powerful form of emotional manipulation that underpins many ethical issues. Streamers might create fake urgency by offering “limited-time offers” or “exclusive deals” that are only available during the livestream or for a short period afterward. A streamer might use statements like, “This deal is only available for the next 10 minutes—once it's gone, it's gone!” or “Only the first 50 people will get this exclusive bundle at a discounted price!” to create panic among viewers. Visual elements like countdowns or timers can reinforce the sense of urgency as well. The urgency makes viewers feel like they must act quickly to avoid missing out on a valuable opportunity. This sense of FOMO can

create anxiety, pushing viewers to make snap decisions rather than carefully considering whether the product or offer is actually something they need or want.

Beyond just product offers, FOMO also lies behind the promotion of toxic, value-based lessons, particularly through the employment of gaslighting tactics. As previously discussed, streamers use gaslighting strategies to manipulate viewers into feeling inadequate or unfulfilled unless they buy into the streamer's particular lessons. They may suggest that if the viewer does not purchase their course or subscribe to their content, they will be left behind in their personal or professional development. Statements like, "Everyone successful has taken this step, don't be the one who misses out!" or "If you don't invest in yourself now, you'll regret it later" are designed to create a sense of urgency and inadequacy, making the viewer feel that they must act immediately to avoid being left behind. The integration of FOMO and gaslighting tactics in live streaming results in a powerful form of emotional manipulation, where viewers are not only urged to make impulsive purchase but are also gradually influenced into adopting those toxic values.

Cognitive manipulation

Cognitive manipulation in live streaming involves influencing how viewers perceive information, make decisions, and interpret the content presented by the streamer. This type of manipulation is subtle and can be highly effective, particularly because it often goes unnoticed by the viewer. Unlike emotional manipulation, which targets viewers' feelings, cognitive manipulation focuses on shaping their thoughts and beliefs, often by distorting reality or presenting information in a way that guides them toward a specific conclusion. Meanwhile, because viewers often see streamers as trusted friends within a parasocial relationship, they become more vulnerable. This strategic manipulation is a significant factor contributing to the prevalence of false advertising in livestreaming. Streamers often emphasise the product's best features while downplaying or omitting any flaws. This can create a misleading image of the product in the viewer's mind, leading them to believe that the item is more suitable for their needs than it actually is. Michelle, E-commerce Manager, explained in detail how this "trick" works:

For example, with cosmetics, the effects they promise may not necessarily meet the needs of all consumers, as the effectiveness of such products varies from person to person, and the results each individual sees can differ. However, when streamers address a broad audience, they won't make this clear in every detail. They will highlight the best possible effects, which might lead some consumers to believe that they will achieve the same results after using the product.

Similarly, by presenting products in an idealised manner through the use of carefully controlled lighting, strategic angles, and specifically chosen models, streamers can also effectively manipulate viewers' perceptions, encouraging them to make a purchase based on the flawless image portrayed during the stream. This cognitive manipulation creates a bias in which consumers expect the product to meet these idealised standards. However, this often leads to consumer dissatisfaction when the actual product fails to align with these expectations. For instance, a streamer may display a piece of clothing that appears perfectly tailored

during the live stream. This presentation leads viewers to believe that the garment will look equally flawless on them. However, in reality, the product may have a poor fit or differ in colour from what was depicted. One of the participants confirmed this with her own experience: *“For example, a few days ago, I bought a T-shirt online. I thought it was a slim-fit style, but when it arrived, I found that it almost reached my knees—it was much longer than I expected. However, it didn’t look that long in the live stream”* (Kathy, Live Streaming Operation Executive). Such differences highlight the issue of inconsistency in product quality, ultimately resulting in consumers being misled by the manipulated representation of the product during the live stream.

Beyond merely influencing purchasing decisions, this cognitive manipulation also underlies the issue of promoting homogenous beauty standards through attractiveness. Research indicates a positive correlation between streamers' physical attractiveness and consumers' perception of their persuasiveness (Cohen and Golden, 1972). Brielmann and Pelli (2018) further elaborate that physical attractiveness reflects certain desirable traits, such as facial symmetry, large eyes, a well-proportioned body, a pleasant smile, appealing voice, youthful appearance, and other attributes. Throughout the interviews, most participants noted that streamers or the models they collaborate with typically conform to a narrow beauty standard, often characterised by being thin, tall, and fair-skinned. Leveraging physical attractiveness, streamers aim to either increase sales or generate more virtual gifts. However, this consistent portrayal reinforces the idea that beauty is limited to these specific traits, subtly shaping societal perceptions of attractiveness. As a result, consumers may not only feel pressured to buy products in the hopes of achieving a similar look but may also internalise these restrictive beauty ideals, which can contribute to broader issues of body image and self-esteem. The impact of this cognitive manipulation extends far beyond the immediate context of the purchase, influencing how individuals perceive beauty and value themselves and others.

Moreover, using fake testimonials, i.e. presenting fabricated or selectively chosen testimonials, streamers can influence how viewers perceive the credibility and effectiveness of a product or service. This manipulation shapes viewers' thoughts and beliefs, leading them to trust the endorsements as genuine and reliable, even when they are not. Furthermore, by using an unclear promotional strategy, streamers can influence how viewers perceive the value of the offers or deals presented to them. For example, a streamer might promote a product by initially showing it priced at \$500, then suddenly offer it for \$200, claiming that the massive discount is due to a special event. Viewers are cognitively manipulated into perceiving the deal as a great bargain, even though the pricing tactics may be misleading.

Behavioural manipulation

Behavioural manipulation in livestreaming involves influencing viewers' actions through various psychological and strategic techniques. Unlike cognitive manipulation, which focuses on altering perceptions and beliefs, behavioural manipulation aims to directly affect how viewers behave. Ethical issues like forced subscription is the outcome of behavioural manipulation in live streaming. By creating a barrier to access, viewers are compelled to subscribe even if they are not fully interested in doing so. It may involve making exclusive content or information available only to subscribers or offering rewards or promotion that can only be obtained through subscription. Kathy, Live Streaming Operation Executive, demonstrated this in her

interview: “*With some discount coupons, you must first follow the streamer or the brand's live streaming room in order to claim them*”. The pressure to subscribe, whether due to FOMO or exclusive content, manipulates viewers into taking an action they might otherwise avoid.

Another issue related to behavioural manipulation is forced endorsement. This involves manipulating viewers into more strongly endorsing the stream than they might naturally want to by connecting endorsement to rewards or access to certain features. For example, a streamer might require viewers to send a certain number of virtual gifts to join the fan club and participate in activities like lucky draw, thereby forcing them to endorse the stream in ways they might not choose on their own. As a live streamer, Becky explained the rules for joining her fan group:

The requirement to join my fan group is to follow me and also send at least one light stick (virtual gift). Once they're in the group, I'll share documents I've organised. ... By sending these documents directly to them, they won't need to spend time searching for the information themselves. So, if they want access, they need to send a virtual gift first.

Lastly, behavioural manipulation often works hand in hand with social influence to influence viewer actions. Ethical issues like fake engagement utilises the effects of social influence and behavioural manipulation by creating an environment where viewers are deceived into believing that certain behaviours are more common or expected than they really are. According to social influence theory, the behaviours of others in a social environment affects the likelihood of an individual engaging in that behaviour (Liang & Shen, 2018; Wang et al., 2012). For example, if a streamer employs an internet "water army", a group of paid individuals, to continuously send virtual gifts during the livestream, real viewers might feel pressured to do the same, perceiving it as the norm. Streamers can even amplify social influence by publicly recognising or rewarding viewers who engage in certain behaviours. Individuals are more inclined to send gifts when they observe that many of their peers have done so as they are driven by the desire to conform to social norms and maintain their image or sense of belonging within the group (Luo et al., 2024). Individuals' purchasing intentions are influenced in much the same way. Another live streamer participant, Amy, reflected on her own experience with this:

We usually encourage customers who have already purchased to post 'bought' comments in the review section, often by offering incentives like additional delivery insurance. Additionally, we might have staff or 'water army' post 'bought' comments as well. This way, when other users see that many people have bought the product, they might be more likely to follow and make a purchase.

4.3.3 Insufficient regulatory frameworks

Insufficient regulatory frameworks are a significant underlying mechanism that exacerbates nearly all the ethical issues previously discussed. Characterised by inadequate oversight and the presence of regulatory loopholes, this mechanism creates an environment where many grey areas exist, allowing unethical behaviour to thrive. This not only harms consumers but also undermines the integrity of the live-streaming industry as a whole, allowing those who exploit these gaps to gain an unfair advantage. Without robust, up-

to-date, and enforceable regulations, the industry remains vulnerable to a host of ethical issues, ultimately eroding consumer trust and threatening the sustained growth of the sector.

Inadequate oversight

While some regulations exist to govern live streaming, oversight is often weak or inconsistent. This oversight gap allows streamers to prioritise profit over ethical standards, leading to ethical issues like false advertising and fake testimonials. Streamers are prohibited from discussing product effects, such as whitening or weight loss, without first submitting substantiated evidence to the platform, and the exaggeration of product efficacy is explicitly forbidden. However, the enforcement of these regulations remains inadequate, leading to significant gaps in oversight. Many streamers continue to use vague descriptions or substitute terms to suggest these benefits. Even more concerning is that some streamers present supporting evidence, which is often fake or forged. The platform's failure to identify these fraudulent practices underscores the inadequacy of its regulatory oversight.

In addition to these issues, the lack of stringent oversight also opens the door to various forms of infringement. Many streamers, taking advantage of the platform's insufficient monitoring, promote and sell counterfeit goods. One participant, Max, Live Streaming Operation Executive, highlighted this issue during her interview, mentioning that she often sees live streams selling counterfeit luxury goods: *“The streamers will just have something to cover the brand logos, in this way they can continue to sell them”*

In the cases of unauthorised use, reproduction, or distribution of content that violates intellectual property rights, the situation is quite similar to selling counterfeit goods. Despite clear regulations, streamers often exploit the platform's inadequate oversight by making minor edits to the content, such as adding a watermark or overlaying music on the original sound. These small alterations allow them to use copyrighted material during live streaming without being easily detected. Just like with counterfeit products, this tactic enables streamers to continue violating intellectual property rights, further highlighting the platform's insufficient regulatory measures.

When it comes to content with sexual connotations, inadequate oversight also plays a significant role in allowing these violations to slip through. Although platforms like Douyin have clear regulations against sexually suggestive content, inadequate oversight has allowed this type of content to persist. Douyin's policy explicitly states that strict action will be taken against behaviours aimed at provoking sexual desire, including but not limited to suggestive displays of body parts, performances with strong sexual innuendos, and vulgar dances. However, due to insufficient monitoring, these types of live streams or content can still be found. This highlights a significant gap between the platform's stated policies and the actual effectiveness of their implementation, allowing inappropriate content to continue circulating despite the regulations in place. Kate, Senior Operation Executive, recalled the following:

You can still see many streamers, both male and female, wearing very little clothing while dancing, similar to the live streams for Coconut Juice brand “Yeshu”. I believe this is sexual connotation, yet the platform doesn't seem to take any action.

Finally, but importantly, inadequate oversight of digital platforms significantly contributes to the dissemination of incorrect values. According to the notice issued by China's National Radio and Television Administration and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in the “Code of Conduct for Online Streamers”, streamers are required to convey a correct worldview, life philosophy, and value system, uphold social morality, adhere to professional ethics, and actively promote personal integrity and virtue. However, some streamers continue to flaunt wealth and communicate toxic values. Although some face temporary account suspensions as punishment, they do not face severe consequences and can continue live streaming by using other people's accounts afterwards.

The practice of using another person's identity to create an account and conduct live streaming significantly amplifies all the previously discussed ethical issues. By operating under someone else's identity, streamers can avoid personal accountability and the consequences of their actions, thereby perpetuating unethical practices without fear of punishment. There is no doubt there are relevant regulations: “Online streamers must comply with the regulations on real-name registration, cooperate with the platform by providing authentic and valid identification information for real-name registration, and use account names in a standardised manner” (China's National Radio and Television Administration and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in the “Code of Conduct for Online Streamers”). However, without effective oversight, the practice of using others' accounts for live streaming persists. *“Even if you can't use your own real name or identity, you can still use your friend's, or even your mum's or dad's. The platform doesn't enforce this strictly”* (Star, Live Streamer).

Regulatory loopholes

Expanding on the earlier discussion of inadequate oversight, it is evident that the regulatory framework in live streaming also has significant loopholes that further intensify the ethical issues previously discussed. For example, in addition to regulations on the use of others' identity to live stream, there are significant regulatory loopholes concerning the identification and background checks of streamers themselves. Currently, to create a personal live streaming account on platforms like Douyin, users are only required to upload their identification card, with no further background checks conducted. This not only increases the chance of allowing unethical individuals to participate in and even profit from the platform but also allows streamers to engage in immoral behaviour like using fake personas to deceive viewers. *“The simple fact is that bad people have moved online; now, anyone with a phone can start live streaming. That's the reality we face today”* (Raffel, Head of China Marketing). Without a compulsory background check, some streamers often present themselves as experts in specific fields, offering advice or teachings to their viewers. However, the reality is that they may lack the necessary qualifications or experience to provide accurate or reliable information.

What is more concerning is streamers with criminal backgrounds or who have engaged in other forms of unethical behaviour. According to one interview participant, some of their colleagues have criminal histories, yet they have still been able to become streamers. These individuals often create fake personas to interact with viewers and solicit virtual gifts. *“Moreover, there are no significant barriers to becoming a*

streamer, and no background checks are conducted. In fact, many streamers have criminal backgrounds” (Star, Live Streamer).

Another significant regulatory loophole in the live streaming industry is the absence of transaction limits. Unlike traditional financial systems, where large transactions are subject to scrutiny and reporting requirements, live streaming platforms often allow users to send gifts with few, if any, limitations. Users can transfer substantial sums, sometimes amounting to tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars, to a single streamer without triggering any regulatory oversight. This lack of regulation creates a favourable environment for money laundering. Criminals can take advantage of these platforms to move large amounts of money across borders with minimal detection. By disguising illegal funds as legitimate transactions within the platform, such as virtual gifts, they can effectively launder money by converting illicit gains into seemingly legitimate income for the streamer. During the interview with Si, Live Streamer, he offered the following example:

For example, some individuals even use live streaming for money laundering by forming a partnership with the streamer. They send virtual gifts with the intent of laundering money, and then later reclaim the money from the streamer offline. Both the streamer and the platform take a commission from these transactions.

4.4 The interplay between the underlying mechanisms

The preceding section detailed how asymmetric power relations, psychological manipulation, and insufficient regulatory frameworks independently contribute to ethical issues in live streaming. However, these mechanisms do not operate in isolation. Instead, they are deeply interrelated, creating a complex web of influence that exacerbates the ethical challenges within the live streaming environment. Understanding these interconnections is crucial for comprehensively addressing the multifaceted ethical dilemmas faced by the industry. As shown in Figure 1, the interplay between these mechanisms creates a loop where each factor reinforces and amplifies the others. For instance, the power imbalances between streamers and viewers are not only a consequence of the platforms’ design and streamers’ celebrity status but are also continually reinforced by the psychological manipulation tactics employed by streamers. These tactics, in turn, are often enabled by insufficient regulatory frameworks that fail to address or mitigate the power differentials and manipulative behaviours. Consequently, this interplay contributes to a digital ecosystem where unethical practices can thrive, posing significant risks to both individual viewers and the broader integrity of the live streaming industry.

4.4.1 Asymmetric power relations and psychological manipulation

The relationship between asymmetric power relations and psychological manipulation is particularly significant. Asymmetric power in live streaming primarily stems from the platform's empowerment of streamers and the celebrity status that some streamers achieve. These factors have a significant influence on streamers, allowing them to manipulate what viewers see, how they interact, and ultimately, how they perceive the content presented to them. This manipulation is critical in the development and strengthening of

parasocial relationships, where viewers form a deep emotional connection with the streamer, often perceiving them as a close friend or trusted confidant, despite the inherently one-sided nature of the interaction. Streamers can selectively share aspects of their lives, creating a fake version of themselves that resonates most with their audience. This fake persona often appears extremely relatable, trustworthy, or aspirational, which draws viewers in and fosters a sense of intimacy. Perceived intimacy is a keystone of parasocial relationships. Streamers can also use their power to deepen these relationships by engaging in direct interactions with viewers, such as responding to specific comments, acknowledging gifts, or addressing viewers by name. These interactions can have a profound impact on viewers, making them feel special and valued. Research indicates that viewers tend to form stronger emotional connections and a sense of identification with media figures who offer more immersive parasocial interactions (Brown & Basil, 2010; Brown, 2015; Frederick et al., 2012). The streamer's ability to selectively engage with viewers reinforces the parasocial bond, as viewers may perceive these interactions as genuine recognition or personal attention. The following excerpt from Zha, *Live Streamer*, supports this: *"As streamers, we can select comments from viewers who we feel have a favourable opinion of us, then interact with them. We use these interactions to let them know that we are paying attention to them"*. As the parasocial relationship deepens, streamers gain an even greater ability to manipulate their viewers' emotions and turn their viewers' emotional investment into financial gain.

Moreover, because the empowered streamer operates with low transparency, they can exploit the power imbalance to emotionally manipulate viewers. By fostering a sense of urgency or exclusivity, streamers leverage their superior access to information, taking advantage of viewers' limited awareness and understanding. For instance, a streamer might announce a limited-time offer or exclusive product available only during the live stream, creating a sense of FOMO. People tend to place greater value on opportunities when they anticipate missing them soon, which can motivate them to take immediate action in response to perceived threats (Wu et al., 2021). During the interview with Michelle, E-commerce Manager, she revealed that, *"The information reaching consumers isn't very transparent; streamers often play tricks. For example, even though there's definitely inventory available, they tell consumers it's running out to drive sales."* By strategically controlling the timing and presentation of offers, streamers can heighten the perception of time scarcity, pressuring viewers to act quickly, often leading to impulsive purchases in the fear of missing out on valuable opportunities (Liu et al., 2022). The result is a powerful tool for driving engagement and sales, often leading viewers to make impulsive purchases or financial contributions that they might otherwise have reconsidered with more information or time.

The asymmetric power in live streaming not only facilitates emotional manipulation but also extends to cognitive and behavioural manipulation. In cognitive manipulation, streamers have the power to selectively present information, emphasising certain aspects of a product while downplaying or ignoring others, thus manipulating viewers' perceptions of reality. Because viewers often trust the streamer's judgment and expertise—especially in the context of a deepening parasocial relationship—they may not critically evaluate the information presented to them. *"Fans might trust the products he recommends, and in his live*

stream, he doesn't clearly explain what the product actually does” (Kate, Senior Operation Executive). This trust allows the streamer to manipulate the cognitive processes of their viewers, shaping their beliefs and perceptions in a way that aligns with the streamer’s objectives, often driving viewers to make decisions that they might not have made if they had a more balanced perspective.

Lastly, one of the most common forms of behavioural manipulation involves streamers coercing viewers into subscribing to their channels or fan clubs. Subscriptions often come with perceived benefits, such as access to exclusive content, participation in special events, or eligibility for rewards like giveaways. Beyond subscriptions, streamers also use their power to coerce viewers into endorsing their content, typically through virtual gifts or social sharing. Streamers have the power to set up rules where viewers are pressured to send virtual gifts in exchange for recognition or rewards. For instance, during her interview, Becky, Live Streamer, explained how this mechanism works on Douyin: *“On Douyin, there's a feature for setting up a fan group, and as a streamer, I can set entry requirements for the group. For example, I can require that you send a fan badge to join my group, or you can enter simply by following me”*. A streamer might also promise to offer exclusive content or even allow direct interpersonal interaction in exchange for a certain level of gifting. These coercions are direct consequences of the significant power imbalance that exists in these interactions, where the streamer’s elevated status and control over the platform allow them to guide and pressure viewers into complying with their demands.

Conversely, psychological manipulation can also reinforce asymmetric power relations. As streamers skillfully manipulate viewers to increase their reliance, whether by enhancing parasocial relationships and emotional connections, projecting perceived expertise, or maintaining continuous interaction, viewers are likely to become more trusting and reliant on the streamer’s guidance. Emotionally, viewers may start to see the streamer as a trusted friend whose opinions and judgments are to be valued highly. Cognitively, the streamer’s consistent portrayal of expertise can lead viewers to obey their authority on certain topics, whether it is product recommendations, value systems, or social opinions. Behaviourally, the frequent and direct interactions between streamers and their audience can create a sense of routine or habit, where viewers are coerced to watch regularly, participate actively, or even contribute financially. During the interview with Rose, Channel Sales Manager, she explained this as follows:

I think it's more about supporting the streamer. Once you've constantly watched and given money to the streamer, you've essentially invested a sunk cost, which makes you less willing to see them fail. For example, you'll keep wanting to invest more in this because you've already given them money, and you feel like this is someone you've chosen to support, so you naturally want them to succeed.

This reliance further strengthens the streamer's power, creating a loop where psychological manipulation and power asymmetry mutually reinforce each other. As the streamer’s power grows, their capacity to manipulate increases, leading to greater viewer dependency. This dependency, in turn, further amplifies the streamer’s power, allowing them to exert even more influence over their viewers. This is evident from a story that Star, Live Streamer, shared during the interview about a colleague: *“Once a fake sense of intimacy is established, if she sends gifts to another streamer, he throws a tantrum, demanding that*

she only support him. Fearing the loss of their relationship, the fan stops gifting others”. Over time, this cycle deepens the power imbalance to the point where viewers may find it difficult to distinguish between genuine content and manipulative tactics, or to recognise the extent of the control the streamer has over their perceptions and actions.

However, when streamers excessively manipulate their viewers, they risk losing the trust and loyalty that they depend on. While tactics like creating a sense of urgency or fostering fake intimacy through a fake persona might drive short-term gains, viewers are likely to catch on over time. If a streamer consistently uses these tactics, it can lead to a gradual erosion of trust. What started as a seemingly close relationship between the streamer and their viewer can quickly turn sour when viewers feel they are being treated as mere tools for profit rather than valued members. As trust diminishes, viewers may start to question the streamer’s authenticity and motivations. They might become sceptical of the streamer’s recommendations, interactions, and overall behaviour. Over time, this growing scepticism can lead to disengagement. Loyal followers may become less active, reducing their participation in live streams or interactions, and eventually, they might choose to unfollow the streamer altogether. The following excerpts from the interviews confirm this:

But later on, I stopped giving him money because I felt like he was just draining me. I couldn't tell if he saw me as an ATM or something else. (Star, Live Streamer)

If I buy something from a streamer a few times and the product turns out to be of poor quality or not as advertised, I probably won't continue buying from that streamer in the future, and I'll likely unfollow them as well. (Max, Live Streaming Operation Executive)

4.4.2 Insufficient regulatory frameworks as an exacerbating factor

Insufficient regulatory frameworks in the live streaming industry significantly exacerbates the issues of asymmetric power relations and psychological manipulation. In this process, three interrelated aspects play pivotal roles: low transparency, minimal accountability, and lack of consumer protection. Each of these factors contributes to the imbalance of power relations between streamers and viewers, amplifying the potential for manipulation and exploitation.

Low transparency

Low transparency, a direct consequence of insufficient regulatory frameworks, significantly contributes to asymmetric power relations and psychological manipulation. In the absence of stringent regulations and oversight requiring full disclosure of product information and streamers’ identities, streamers are free to selectively share information that aligns with their personal or commercial objectives. This selective disclosure creates an environment where viewers are exposed to fabricated narratives that often cover the true nature of the content being presented. As suggested by Amy, in some cases, streamers may even alter the shipping origin to make consumers believe that the products they purchase are authentic or shipped from official distributors.

This lack of transparency caused by insufficient regulatory frameworks also allows streamers to construct and maintain fake personas that may be entirely fabricated or strategically exaggerated to evoke trust or empathy. Viewers, who lack the necessary information to critically assess the truth, may believe in their fake personas and develop parasocial relationships with them. As these relationships grow stronger, the power imbalance between streamers and viewers becomes more pronounced, giving the streamer even greater influence over their audience. Streamers can exploit their viewers' trust, guiding their perceptions, decisions, and emotions in ways that serve the streamers' interests. In this way, the asymmetry of information becomes a powerful tool for influence, further entrenching viewers' dependency on a streamer and perpetuating the power imbalance.

Minimal accountability

The issue of minimal accountability further exacerbates the power asymmetry and the potential for psychological manipulation. When streamers are not held accountable for their actions, they are effectively given a free pass to engage in behaviours that would otherwise be considered unethical or deceptive. Without the threat of serious penalties, such as whole platform bans, or legal punishment, streamers can manipulate their audience with little concern. This empowerment allows them to exploit their influence over viewers in ways that serve their personal or financial interests, often at the expense of their audience's well-being. For instance, a streamer might use exaggerated claims or fake testimonials to build credibility and trust. Knowing that there is little chance of being penalised for these actions, the streamer can continue to deceive viewers, further consolidating their power. This lack of consequences reinforces the power asymmetry, as viewers are left with few means to challenge or question the streamer's actions, making them more susceptible to manipulation.

The minimal accountability in live streaming environments not only exacerbates power asymmetry but also significantly facilitates psychological manipulation. Streamers can exploit their unchecked power to engage in various forms of psychological manipulation, such as emotional appeals, FOMO tactics, or even sexual connotation. These manipulative strategies are often used to influence viewers' behaviour, encouraging them to make purchases, send virtual gifts, or engage more deeply with the streamer in private. Referring again to the example provided by Star, most of his colleagues have fabricated personal struggles to evoke empathy from viewers and solicit financial support, knowing that the platform is unlikely to investigate the truthfulness of their claims and that they will not face any punishment. This emotional manipulation taps into the viewer's sense of loyalty and compassion, compelling them to offer financial support. The lack of accountability means that the streamer can repeatedly employ such tactics without facing consequences, further entrenching their control over the audience.

The ongoing use of psychological manipulation, unchecked by regulatory oversight, leads to a cycle where the streamer's power and the viewer's dependency on the streamer continually reinforce each other. Viewers, increasingly manipulated by these tactics, become more reliant on the streamer for emotional fulfillment, deepening the parasocial relationship and further skewing the power dynamics in favour of the streamer.

Lack of education on consumer self-protection

A significant factor exacerbating the issues of asymmetric power relations and psychological manipulation in the live streaming industry is the lack of education on consumer self-protection. Many viewers enter the live streaming environment with little to no understanding of the regulations that govern these platforms or the potential risks associated with engaging with streamers. This lack of awareness leaves them vulnerable to manipulation, as they are not equipped with the knowledge or tools necessary to protect themselves from deceptive practices.

The regulatory frameworks that do exist are primarily designed to oversee the behaviour of streamers, rather than to empower viewers with the knowledge to protect themselves. This oversight gap means that even when regulations are in place, they do little to help viewers navigate the complexities of live streaming interactions. For instance, viewers might not understand that virtual gifts, once given, are non-refundable. As highlighted in interviews, many viewers of entertainment live streaming can feel exploited and aim to get their money back from streamers. However, they quickly discover that there are no regulations requiring streamers to return the money given to them, particularly when given in the form of virtual gifts. These virtual gifts are typically framed as tokens of appreciation for the value that streamers provide, creating an implicit understanding that the money is a one-way transaction with no expectation of return. Streamers, aware of the regulatory loopholes and the weak consumer protection measures, can manipulate this lack of knowledge to their advantage. Knowing that viewers are unlikely to demand refunds or challenge deceptive practices due to their limited understanding of the rules, streamers can push the boundaries of ethical behaviour with little fear of consequences. This exploitation of the knowledge gap further intensifies the power imbalance between streamers and viewers, as it allows streamers to exercise control over their audience without facing significant resistance.

4.5 Summary

The findings section of this study presented a comprehensive examination of the ethical issues prevalent in live streaming, as revealed through thematic analysis of interviews with industry practitioners. The analysis identified six major categories of ethical concerns: deception, coercion, unhealthy streamer-viewer relationships, privacy violations, the dissemination of incorrect values, and the exploitation of legal loopholes. Each of these categories encompasses multiple unethical practices that have significant implications for both consumers and the ecosystem of the live streaming industry.

The study delved into the underlying mechanisms that contribute to these ethical issues, highlighting three key factors: asymmetric power relations, psychological manipulation, and insufficient regulatory frameworks. These mechanisms do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact in complex ways to exacerbate the ethical challenges identified. Asymmetric power relations, driven by a platform's empowerment of streamers and their celebrity status, create an environment where streamers can exercise significant influence over viewers, shaping their perceptions, decisions, and behaviours. This power

imbalance is further reinforced by psychological manipulation tactics, such as emotional appeals and the creation of parasocial relationships, which deepen viewers' dependency on streamers.

Insufficient regulatory frameworks emerged as a critical factor that exacerbates both power asymmetry and psychological manipulation. The lack of stringent regulations and effective oversight allows streamers to operate with minimal transparency and accountability, enabling them to exploit their audience with relative impunity. The study identified low transparency, minimal accountability, and a lack of education on consumer self-protection as the primary ways in which inadequate regulatory frameworks contribute to these ethical issues. The interplay between these mechanisms creates a feedback loop where each factor reinforces the others, leading to a digital environment where unethical practices can thrive.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This study employs a qualitative methodology to explore the ethical challenges in live streaming and the underlying mechanisms driving them. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data, addressing the study's key objectives. This chapter examines the main findings presented in Chapter 4, followed by a discussion of their theoretical and practical contributions. Additionally, it outlines the study's limitations and proposes directions for future research.

5.2 General discussion

5.2.1 Ethical issues

Departing from a primary focus on consumer experiences and behaviours, particularly in game and e-commerce live streaming, this research also explores the ethical landscape from the perspective of industry practitioners who actively shape and navigate the live streaming environment. These practitioners have a deeper understanding of the operational, strategic, and ethical complexities that exist behind the scenes, offering insights that consumers themselves may not fully grasp. From their perspective, this study provides a comprehensive exploration of the ethical issues prevalent in the live streaming industry, setting itself apart from existing research in several key ways.

The scope of this research extends beyond the frequently discussed issues of deceptive selling practices (Wu et al., 2022; Yang, 2023). These concerns are important and have been extensively covered in previous studies, such as the Live Streaming Carrying Consumer Rights Public Opinion Analysis Report (2023). This report, jointly released by the Beijing Sunshine Consumption Big Data Research Institute and other organisations, identifies eight major consumer rights issues: false advertising, product quality, misleading pricing, unprofessional behaviour, delivery problems, issues with returns and exchanges, selling prohibited goods, and inducing off-site consumption. However, the findings highlight that these challenges are merely a subset of the broader ethical issues embedded in the live streaming landscape. The research also uncovers equally significant issues with far-reaching consequences for consumer well-being. For example, streamers subtly promoting incorrect values and harmful ideologies during live streams pose a significant risk to the moral and psychological well-being of viewers. This is particularly concerning in the case of younger audiences, who are still in the formative stages of developing their beliefs. This aspect of the ethical issues involved in live streaming has been largely overlooked. Existing research tends to focus on issues that are financial related, such as impulsive purchases or virtual gift transactions, while paying limited attention to the long-term social and psychological impact of the values and ideologies promoted by streamers.

Beyond the focus on toxic values, this research also highlights the ethical concerns surrounding unhealthy streamer-viewer relationships. Previous studies (Kowert et al., 2021; Fu & Hsu, 2023; Lim et al., 2020) have already examined how unique two-way communication and immediate interaction, which are defining features of live streaming, foster the development of parasocial relationships between

streamers and viewers. Building on this foundation, the current study identifies that streamers exploit these relationships in an unhealthy way for financial gain. By selectively acknowledging individual viewers through direct responses with tailored content, streamers can foster a sense of exclusivity and personal attention, which heightens viewers' emotional attachment. This emotional attachment often leads to increased financial contributions through gifting or purchasing more products. Viewers, bound by the emotional connection and trust they have placed in the streamer, may not realise that their interactions are being strategically guided for financial gain. This exploitation of emotional investment not only undermines the integrity of the streamer-viewer relationship but also raises significant ethical concerns about the extent to which streamers are willing to manipulate vulnerable audiences for profit. The study highlights how this exploitation further deepens the power imbalance, as streamers leverage their influence to benefit financially while maintaining minimal accountability.

Additionally, privacy violations and the exploitation of regulatory loopholes, which allow streamers to evade accountability, further exacerbate the ethical complexities within the live streaming ecosystem. Privacy violations have been a focal point in prior research on live streaming, with several studies examining privacy concerns from different perspectives. For instance, Wu et al. (2022), Wu et al. (2023) and Chowdhury et al. (2016) explored privacy issues primarily from the viewpoints of streamers themselves or bystanders who may inadvertently have their personal information exposed. Such studies often focus on how streamers manage their own privacy or how platform design influences the unintended exposure of personal details during live broadcasts. The primary aim of these studies centers on protecting privacy. This study adds to this line of research by offering insights into how streamers intentionally disclose others' private information, including viewers' identities, for their own benefit. In some cases, the release of private information can be a tactic to manipulate viewers by leveraging their curiosity. The findings highlight the importance of stronger regulatory frameworks to prevent such privacy violations, ensuring that viewers' data is protected and streamers are held accountable for intentionally exposing sensitive information for personal gain.

Lastly, this study aligns with existing research in confirming the exploitation of regulatory loopholes as a persistent issue. Previous studies have documented how streamers take advantage of these gaps to sell counterfeit or pirated products, violate intellectual property rights (Yu, 2023), and engage in implicit sexualised performances (Ye, 2023). These consistent findings highlight the lack of robust regulatory oversight, which has allowed such practices to become normalised within the live streaming industry. However, this study also sheds light on an issue that has not been thoroughly explored in previous research: money laundering through live streaming platforms. There have already been several incidents reported that reveal the extent to which live streaming is being exploited for laundering illicit funds under the guise of virtual gifts or donations, proving that this is a significant concern. The ability to mask illegal financial activity through seemingly harmless transactions not only undermines a platform's integrity but also links it to broader financial crimes, damaging the trust of users and stakeholders alike.

5.2.2 Underlying mechanisms and their interplay

This study not only provides a comprehensive understanding of the ethical issues present in live streaming but, more importantly, uncovers the underlying mechanisms driving these issues. This study has revealed three critical mechanisms: asymmetric power relations, psychological manipulation, and insufficient regulatory frameworks. While aspects of these mechanisms have been touched upon in broader discussions of digital media ethics, their specific impact within the live streaming industry has not been comprehensively explored until now.

Asymmetric power relations is the first mechanism identified by this study. While it has been discussed in broader digital media studies, the greater part of the research has focused primarily on consumer empowerment. Consumer empowerment refers to the state where consumers have greater access to information and control over decisions (Hu & Krishen, 2019). Social media enhances this by providing users with vast resources, enabling self-education, and boosting decision-making capabilities (Moedeen et al., 2024). In live streaming, instant communication allows consumers to actively participate rather than remain passive recipients. However, this research shifts the focus to how streamers, rather than consumers, are empowered through platform design and celebrity status. By accounting for these factors, this study provides a more comprehensive exploration of the power dynamics at play in live streaming. According to Humphreys and Grayson (2008), power is balanced through the exchange of resources among consumers, businesses, third parties, and other consumers. This study reveals that, empowered by the platform design, streamers can control the information and resources delivered to viewers. For example, streamers can manipulate comments in chat channels to create artificial endorsement which disrupts the balance of power.

Moreover, this study illustrates how control over user interactions, combined with streamers' celebrity status, fosters a power dynamic heavily skewed in their favour. This enables streamers to facilitate parasocial relationships and manipulate their audience more effectively. Previous studies have shown that celebrity streamers, particularly in e-commerce, are more impactful, persuasive, and powerful in influencing consumers' behaviours (Zhang et al., 2024). Lou et al. (2022) found that a streamer's popularity can stimulate impulsive purchases by boosting their perceived reputation. The streamer's popularity refers to their ability to increase people's desire to watch their online streaming shows (Guo et al., 2022). Building on this literature, this study adds a new dimension by revealing how live streaming platforms enable streamers to invest in paid traffic promotion, artificially boosting their popularity and increasing the likelihood of viewers encountering their streams. These frequent encounters can foster parasocial relationships between viewers and streamers, making viewers feel as though they have personal connections with streamers, akin to close friends in real life. This finding sheds light on how platforms themselves facilitate the artificial inflation of a streamer's influence, with important implications for understanding how viewers perceive authenticity and how consumer behaviour is manipulated as a result.

Psychological manipulation is the second critical mechanism, where streamers exploit the emotional and cognitive vulnerabilities of their viewers. The concept of manipulation in marketing has been widely discussed, referring to the use of deceptive, misleading, or exploitative tactics to influence consumer behaviour and decision making (Böckenholt & Hügelschäfer, 2020; Smith & Cooper-Martin, 2018). The

manipulation can take many forms, including false advertising, hidden fees, emotional appeals, and social influence, and can have serious consequences for consumer welfare and marketplace efficiency (Cialdini & Goldstein 2004). Emotional appeals and social influence are two central strategies in marketing manipulation (Li & Masri, 2023). Emotional appeals leverage emotions like fear, joy, or nostalgia to shape consumer behaviour (Bagozzi et al., 1999). Social influence involves individuals adjust their opinions, modify their beliefs, or alter their behaviour as a result of interacting with others socially (Moussaïd et al., 2004). A common example is social proof, where people are more likely to engage in a behaviour if they see others doing it (Mortensen & Cialdini, 2020). These tactics work together to enhance the persuasive power of marketing efforts. These strategies, such as emotional appeals and social influence, are also evident in live streaming.

This study adds to existing literature by showing how these tactics are intensified in live streaming due to its unique features, such as real-time interaction and two-way communication. Unlike traditional social media, where there is a delay in feedback, the instantaneous nature of live streaming allows streamers to foster a greater sense of urgency and emotional engagement. Streamers often leverage emotions like empathy, FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out), and perceived intimacy to further encourage viewers to make financial contributions. For example, in live streaming, streamers can immediately acknowledge and respond to viewers' behaviour. This action can make viewers feel special and connected, reinforcing the parasocial relationship and further intensifying psychological manipulation, as viewers become more emotionally invested and vulnerable to persuasion. Similarly, streamers use tactics like fake engagements to foster social influence, i.e. influencing viewers to conform to certain behaviours. This instant interaction-based manipulation adds complexity to the understanding of digital manipulation, highlighting the unique risks inherent to live streaming environments.

The last mechanism discovered by this study that exacerbates the ethical issues of live streaming is **insufficient regulatory frameworks**. With the rapid development of the live streaming industry, the industry's market environment is becoming increasingly chaotic. This, in turn, is attracting the attention of scholars. Wang et al. (2024) observed that most policies related to live streaming lack detailed short-, medium-, or long-term goals. Additionally, these policies are deficient in defining clear priorities, incentives, and implementation strategies. This indicates that the government's regulatory efforts and support mechanisms for the live streaming e-commerce industry are inadequate, failing to effectively guide its development. Wu et al. (2022, p. 23) noted that, "there are no specific policies or laws to govern deceptive designs on livestream platforms". This study also highlights significant weaknesses in the current regulatory frameworks governing live streaming and contributes to existing research by examining how these insufficiencies exacerbate ethical issues within the industry. The findings underscore how streamers, aware of minimal enforcement and accountability, are able to engage in unethical behaviours such as creating false personas, using fake testimonials, selling counterfeit goods, and spreading misinformation. Expanding on existing insights, this study also brings attention to some crucial regulatory loopholes that have not yet been fully explored in previous research, including the absence of background checks on streamers and insufficient transaction limits, which can facilitate serious criminal problems like money laundering.

Beyond the identification of these mechanism, this research also adds insights into the interplay between them, with a focus on the significant relationship between asymmetric power relations and psychological manipulation. Asymmetric power relations enable streamers to engage in various forms of psychological manipulation, targeting viewers' emotional, cognitive, and behavioural vulnerabilities. Conversely, psychological manipulation can reinforce asymmetric power relations. As a streamer effectively manipulates viewers into becoming more reliant on them, whether through emotional engagement, perceived expertise, or constant interaction, viewers may become more trusting and dependent on the streamer's guidance. This dependency further consolidates the streamer's power, creating a feedback loop where psychological manipulation and power asymmetry mutually reinforce each other. In addition, the absence of comprehensive regulatory frameworks exacerbates asymmetric power relations and psychological manipulation in live streaming. Without sufficient regulatory enforcement, streamers are able to exploit their influence over viewers, making it easier to manipulate and deceive them for personal gain. This cyclical interaction between asymmetric power relations, psychological manipulation, and weak regulatory frameworks creates a loop system, where each element reinforces the others, intensifying the ethical challenges in live streaming.

5.3 Theoretical contributions

This study makes four significant theoretical contributions to the understanding of ethical challenges in the live streaming industry. The first contribution lies in its comprehensive insights into ethical issues. Previous studies have primarily focused on one or two aspects of the ethical issues involved in live streaming. For example, Wu et al. (2022) examined deceptive selling strategies, Yu (2023) addressed inconsistent product quality and deregulation, and Wang (2020) explored the problem of selling counterfeits. This research investigated the ethical issues using a more holistic approach, identifying 16 ethical issues across both e-commerce and entertainment live streaming and categorising them into six key types: deception, coercion, exploitation of legal loopholes, unhealthy streamer-viewer relationships, privacy violations, and the dissemination of misinformation. These findings provide a full review of the ethical challenges in live streaming.

Secondly, this study enriches existing research by moving beyond surface-level analysis to examine the underlying mechanisms that contribute to unethical practices in live streaming. While previous studies have identified factors such as power imbalances and insufficient regulations (Wu et al., 2022; Yu, 2023), this study corroborates these findings and adds an additional mechanism: psychological manipulation. Specifically, it reveals how behavioural, cognitive, and emotional manipulation tactics are employed by streamers to influence and control viewers' actions, beliefs, and feelings. By detailing these distinct forms of psychological manipulation alongside the mechanisms of power imbalance and insufficient regulations, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how ethical vulnerabilities are constructed in live streaming.

Thirdly, this study critically examines the interplay among the three identified mechanisms, uncovering a dynamic feedback loop that intensifies ethical risks. Despite extensive efforts to identify

relevant research, no studies to date have explored this issue. The research findings provide a clear picture of how each mechanism reinforces, amplifies, or weakens the other mechanisms. The interaction shows that addressing one mechanism without acknowledging its relationship with the others creates gaps through which unethical practices can continue to flourish. By revealing these interrelated dynamics, this study offers a better understanding of how unethical practices evolve in live streaming, emphasising the need for comprehensive solutions that tackle these issues. This study enables future research to build on more comprehensive foundations, advancing the field beyond isolated case studies towards a more cohesive body of knowledge.

Lastly, this study makes a significant contribution to the literature on parasocial relationships by shifting the focus to an underexplored area: the ethical risks and implications of parasocial relationships. Existing research primarily highlights the positive effects of parasocial relationships on consumer behaviour, such as those identified by Hou et al. (2024), who view parasocial relationships as a driver for virtual gift purchases, Fu and Hsu (2023), who emphasise the role of interactions with co-viewers in impulsive buying, and Liu et al. (2023), who discuss parasocial relationships in enhancing viewer loyalty. This study extends this work by examining how these one-sided emotional connections can be exploited by streamers. It reveals that the real-time and interactive nature of live streaming intensifies parasocial relationships, which deepens the emotional bond between streamers and viewers and makes viewers more vulnerable to manipulation. Empowered by platform design and their elevated status, streamers can leverage parasocial relationships to exploit viewers financially or emotionally.

5.4 Managerial implications

The findings from this research on ethical issues in live streaming provide critical managerial implications for both streaming platforms and the regulatory bodies that govern them. Firstly, the study underscores the urgent need for stronger regulatory frameworks in the live streaming industry. The current lack of accountability enables streamers to exploit viewers through tactics like false advertising, emotional manipulation, and parasocial relationships. Regulatory bodies must address these gaps by establishing legal accountability through strict penalties, such as significant fines or platform bans, and, in severe cases, enforcing criminal responsibility. For instance, streamers found guilty of deceptive practices, fraudulent behaviour, or intentional harm could face criminal charges, including potential imprisonment or probation. Criminal accountability would serve as a strong deterrent, particularly for repeated or egregious offenders, and reinforce that unethical practices in live streaming are subject to serious legal consequences. This added layer of criminal responsibility would ensure that severe cases of exploitation are met with proportionate penalties, strengthening the ethical standards of the live streaming industry and safeguarding consumer rights.

Another tactic that can help accountability within the live streaming sector is mandatory background checks. By requiring background checks for all streamers, platforms and regulatory agencies could help ensure that those with a history of unethical behaviour or previous legal violations are not allowed to participate in live streaming. This process could involve screening for past fraud, unethical marketing practices, or criminal convictions relevant to consumer trust. Streamers who fail to pass background checks

would be restricted from participating, creating a safer environment for viewers by setting a standard of integrity and reducing the prevalence of unethical actors.

In addition to regulatory improvements, industry platforms must prioritise consumer protection by enhancing the transparency of live streaming practices. Platforms like Douyin and other social media giants should implement stricter content moderation tools and algorithms that can detect misleading advertisements, fake testimonials, and deceptive engagement practices. Real-time intervention strategies could prevent unethical behaviour before it escalates, mitigating the psychological and financial harm inflicted on viewers. Furthermore, the industry should foster a culture of ethical conduct by incentivising streamers to maintain high standards of authenticity, rather than merely profiting from manipulative tactics. By doing so, platforms can regain user trust and contribute to a healthier digital ecosystem.

Finally, the study suggests that consumer education must become a priority in mitigating the effects of manipulative live streaming practices. Many viewers lack the knowledge to protect themselves from deceptive tactics, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Platforms, alongside government bodies, could launch public awareness campaigns to educate consumers about their rights and the potential risks associated with engaging in live streaming. Empowering consumers with the knowledge to critically assess the content and interactions they encounter would significantly reduce their susceptibility to coercive techniques such as emotional appeals or FOMO strategies. Equipping consumers with these skills could shift the power dynamic, fostering a more equitable environment where consumers are less reliant on streamers for guidance.

In conclusion, the ethical issues identified in this study reveal the pressing need for systemic changes in live streaming. Stronger regulations, industry accountability, and consumer education are critical measures that, if implemented, could substantially improve the integrity of the live streaming industry, protecting consumers from exploitation while promoting ethical digital interactions.

5.5 Limitations of the study

While this study provides valuable insights into the ethical issues in live streaming, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that may affect the generalisability of the findings. First, the majority of the participants are based in China, which limits the scope of this research to primarily Chinese live streaming platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Taobao Live. These platforms are unique in their market environments, user behaviours, and regulatory frameworks, which may differ significantly from live streaming platforms in other regions, such as Twitch or YouTube Live. As a result, the findings of this study may not fully capture the ethical challenges present in global live streaming practices, particularly those shaped by different cultural, legal, and platform-specific factors.

Another limitation stems from the profiles of the live streamers who participated in this study. Most of the streamers interviewed have relatively small followings, and none are considered mega or top-tier streamers. Consequently, the ethical issues highlighted in this research may reflect the experiences of smaller or mid-level streamers, who may face different pressures and challenges than those with massive audiences. Top-tier streamers often operate under different market dynamics, including higher financial stakes and

stronger scrutiny from platforms, regulators, and audiences, which could lead to distinct ethical concerns not captured in this study.

Additionally, while efforts were made to include practitioners from a variety of positions within the live streaming ecosystem, such as streamers, social media experts, and e-commerce professionals, there remain some gaps in representation. Specifically, the absence of participants who are directly involved in the management or oversight of live streaming platforms presents a notable limitation. Insights from platform operators or administrators could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of how platforms govern ethical issues, enforce regulations, and handle misconduct. Without these perspectives, the study lacks a complete view of the internal policies and decision-making processes that shape the ethical landscape of live streaming.

Finally, the scope of this research is constrained by the methodological choices. While in-depth interviews provided rich qualitative data, they also limited the sample size and the diversity of perspectives. Meanwhile, the sensitive nature of ethical issues in live streaming makes the topic susceptible to social desirability bias, where participants may have been inclined to respond in ways that reflect positively on their ethical standards. To try to avoid that, this study employed two projective techniques, thematic perception technique and third person projection. Future studies could address these limitations by incorporating quantitative methods or visual research and projective techniques, which could also enhance the breadth and comprehensiveness of insights into the ethical landscape in live streaming.

5.6 Future research opportunities

Based on the limitations identified in this study, two more important future research opportunities emerge that could enhance understanding of the ethical landscape of live streaming. First, a significant limitation of this research is its focus on Chinese live streaming platforms. While this provides valuable insights into a specific context, live streaming operates globally, with distinct platforms, regulatory frameworks, and user behaviours in different regions. Future research could explore the ethical issues in live streaming on a global scale, comparing the practices and challenges faced by platforms in different cultural, legal, and economic environments. Such comparative studies could reveal how regional differences in regulation, consumer behaviour, and platform design shape the ethical landscape, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Secondly, future research can also explore the role of high-profile streamers in shaping the ethical challenges of live streaming. This study focused primarily on streamers with smaller followings, who may face different pressures and operate under different constraints compared to top-tier influencers. Mega-streamers often have larger audiences, greater financial incentives, and more complex relationships with platforms, sponsors, and viewers. Future studies could investigate how the ethical concerns faced by high-profile streamers differ from those experienced by smaller creators, and how their influence might contribute to or mitigate unethical practices within the industry. Exploring the power dynamics and responsibilities of high-profile streamers would provide deeper insights into the role of influence and visibility in ethical decision making in live streaming.

The findings from this study also suggest several other intriguing directions for future research. One key area that deserves further exploration is the concept of consumer greed as a driving force behind the ethical issues observed in live streaming. Many participants in this study highlighted that the inappropriate greed of viewers plays a significant role in the proliferation of unethical practices. For example, consumers may actively seek out counterfeit luxury products to signal social status, or constantly watch live streams that feature content with sexual connotations, reflecting a desire to fulfil personal fantasies under the guise of live streaming. Additionally, viewers often desire products that are both cheap and of high quality, a mismatch that can drive streamers to engage in deceptive practices to meet these unrealistic expectations. Future research could further explore this phenomenon by examining the psychological motivations behind consumer behaviour in live streaming, using consumer psychology theories such as use and gratification theory, social comparison theory, and self-determination theory to explore how greed and the pursuit of personal gain influence the ethical challenges in the industry.

Another area for future research is the well-being of streamers themselves, an issue that was frequently raised by participants in this study. Live streaming, particularly in the entertainment sector, is an emotionally and physically demanding job, with streamers often working long hours not only during the live broadcast but also behind the scenes to maintain relationships with their audience. Streamers are expected to offer consistent emotional value to viewers, which can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout. Research into the psychological and emotional strain that live streaming creates among streamers, particularly in the context of the growing demands for constant engagement and interaction, would be an important contribution to understanding the hidden costs of this profession. Studies could draw on concepts from occupational psychology, particularly theories on emotional labour, to assess how streamers manage the strain of their roles and the impact on their overall well-being.

Furthermore, the structural pressures that streamers face from MCN (Multi-Channel Network) companies or guilds also present a rich opportunity for future investigation. Many streamers, particularly in the e-commerce space, are subject to exploitative labour practices, including low salaries, unfair commission structures, and restrictive contract policies that limit their autonomy. Participants in this study described instances of brainwashing or coercion by these organisations, which further exacerbates the emotional and financial pressures on streamers. Future research could examine the power dynamics between streamers and the MCN companies or guilds that employ them, focusing on how these organisations perpetuate unjust labour practices and what regulatory frameworks or industry reforms might be necessary to protect streamers from exploitation.

REFERENCES

- Arora, A., Glaser, D., Kim, A., Kluge, P., Kohli, S., & Sak, N. (2021, July 21). *Live commerce is transforming online shopping*. McKinsey & Company.
<https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/its-showtime-how-live-commerce-is-transforming-the-shopping-experience>
- Aw, E. C.-X., & Labrecque, L. I. (2020). Celebrity endorsement in social media contexts: understanding the role of parasocial interactions and the need to belong. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 37(7), 895-908. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-10-2019-3474>
- Bagozzi, R. P., Gopinath, M., & Nyer, P. U. (1999). The Role of Emotions in Marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 27(2), 184-206. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092070399272005>
- Beall, M. L., Chen, S. L. S., & Terlip, L. (2020a). Watch at your own risk. In S. S. Chen, Z. J. Chen, & N. Allaire (Eds.), *Legal and ethical issues of live streaming* (pp. 157-164). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Beall, M. L., Chen, S. L. S., & Terlip, L. (2020b). You can doesn't mean you should: The rationale and ethics of live streaming crimes. In S. S. Chen, Z. J. Chen, & N. Allaire (Eds.), *Legal and ethical issues of live streaming* (pp. 145-156). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Beijing Sunshine Consumption Big Data Research Institute. (2024, March 14). *Live Streaming Carrying Consumer Rights Public Opinion Analysis Report*. http://www.sun-c.cn/rdgz/202403/t20240314_21933.html
- Bell, B. T., Talbot, C. V., & Deighton-Smith, N. (2024). Following up on #fitspiration: A comparative content analysis and thematic analysis of social media content aiming to inspire fitness from 2014 and 2021. *Psychology of Popular Media*, 13(4), 666-676. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000523>
- Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *NursingPlus Open*, 2, 8-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.npls.2016.01.001>
- Benoliel, J. Q. (1996). Grounded Theory and Nursing Knowledge. *Qualitative Health Research*, 6(3), 406-428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973239600600308>
- Böckenholt, U., & Hügelschäfer, S. (2020). Detecting and measuring susceptibility to manipulative advertising. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 30(3), 392-408.
- Bordens, K. S., & Abbott, B. B. (2002). *Research design and methods: A process approach*. McGraw-Hill.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brielmann, A. A., & Pelli, D. G. (2018). Aesthetics. *Current Biology*, 28(16), R859-R863.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2018.06.004>
- Brown, W. J. (2015). Examining Four Processes of Audience Involvement with Media Personae: Transportation, Parasocial Interaction, Identification, and Worship. *Communication Theory*, 25(3), 259-283. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12053>

- Brown, W. J., & Basil, M. D. (2010). Parasocial Interaction and Identification: Social Change Processes for Effective Health Interventions. *Health Communication, 25*(6-7), 601-602.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2010.496830>
- Burnard, P. (1991). A method of analysing interview transcripts in qualitative research. *Nurse Education Today, 11*(6), 461-466. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-6917\(91\)90009-Y](https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-6917(91)90009-Y)
- Burr, V. (2015). *Social constructionism*. Routledge.
- Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S.,... Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: Complex or simple? Research case examples. *Journal of Research in Nursing, 25*(8), 652-661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206>
- Chakrabarti, B., Bullmore, E., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2006). Empathizing with basic emotions: Common and discrete neural substrates. *Social Neuroscience, 1*(3-4), 364-384.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17470910601041317>
- Chen, C.-P. (2021). Digital gifting in personal brand communities of live-streaming: fostering viewer–streamer–viewer parasocial relationships. *Journal of Marketing Communications, 27*(8), 865-880.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2021.1910327>
- Chen, H. Y., & Boore, J. R. P. (2010). Translation and back-translation in qualitative nursing research: methodological review. *Journal of Clinical Nursing, 19*(1-2), 234-239.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2702.2009.02896.x>
- Chen, J. (2024, October 25). *Over 6.4 Billion! Can the "revived Xinba" bring new momentum to this year's Double 11?* MZtoutiao. <https://www.mztoutiao.com/index.php/index/index/wenzhang.html?id=3567>
- Chen, J., & Liao, J. (2022). Antecedents of viewers' live streaming watching: A perspective of social presence theory. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 839629. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.839629>
- Chen, S., Wang, H., Yang, S., Zhang, F., Gao, X., & Liu, Z. (2024). Burnout among Chinese live streamers: Prevalence and correlates. *PloS One, 19*(5), e0301984. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0301984>
- Chevalier, P. (2024a, April 05). *Live commerce-statistics & facts*. Statista.
<https://www.statista.com/topics/8752/livestream-commerce/#topicOverview>
- Chevalier, P. (2024b, May 28). *Live commerce sales in the U.S. 2022-2026*. Statista.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1276120/livestream-e-commerce-sales-united-states/>
- Chonko, L. B., Wotruba, T. R., & Loe, T. W. (2002). Direct selling ethics at the top: An industry audit and status report. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 22*(2), 87-95.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08853134.2002.10754297>
- Chowdhury, S., Ferdous, M. S., & Jose, J. M. (2016, July 11-15). Bystander privacy in lifelogging. Proceedings of the 30th International BCS Human Computer Interaction Conference, Bournemouth, UK.
- Cialdini, R. B., & Goldstein, N. J. (2004). Social influence: Compliance and conformity. *Annual Review of Psychology, 55*(1), 591-621. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.142015>

- Clement Addo, P., Fang, J., Asare, A. O., & Kulbo, N. B. (2021). Customer engagement and purchase intention in live-streaming digital marketing platforms. *The Service Industries Journal*, 41(11-12), 767-786. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2021.1905798>
- Clement, J. (2023, August 28). *Twitch users in the U.S. 2021-2025*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/532338/twitch-viewing-frequency-usa/>
- Clement, J. (2024, January 10). *Twitch-Statistics & Facts*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/topics/7946/twitch/>
- CNNIC. (2021, February 03). *The 47th China Statistical Report on Internet Development*. https://www.cnnic.net.cn/NMediaFile/old_attach/P020210203334633480104.pdf
- CNNIC. (2023, August). *The 52th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development*. <https://www.cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/202311/P020231121355042476714.pdf>
- CNNIC. (2024, August). *The 54th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development*. <https://www.cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/202411/P020241101318428715781.pdf>
- Cohen, D., & Crabtree, B. (2006, July). *Qualitative research guidelines project*. <http://www.qualres.org>
- Cohen, J. B., & Golden, E. (1972). Informational social influence and product evaluation. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 56(1), 54-59. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0032139>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Cutcliffe, J. R. (2003). Reconsidering Reflexivity: Introducing the Case for Intellectual Entrepreneurship. *Qualitative Health Research*, 13(1), 136-148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732302239416>
- Dai, R. (2019, October 02). *A closer look at China's video game livestreaming duopoly*. Technode. <https://technode.com/2019/10/02/a-closer-look-at-chinas-video-game-livestreaming-duopoly/>
- Daniel, E. S., Orme, S., & Ferchaud, A. (2021). *Not your therapist: Streamers and content creators perception of parasocial relationships and therapeutic inquiries on stream*. National Communication Association.
- Daniel Jr, E. S., & Westerman, D. K. (2017). *Valar Morghulis (All Parasocial Men Must Die): Having Nonfictional Responses to a Fictional Character*. *Communication Research Reports*, 34(2), 143-152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2017.1285757>
- Davies, C., & Fisher, M. (2018). Understanding research paradigms. *Journal of the Australasian Rehabilitation Nurses Association*, 21(3), 21-25. <https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.160174725752074>
- De Tona, C. (2006). But what is interesting is the story of why and how migration happened. *Forum qualitative sozialforschung/forum: Qualitative social research*, 7(3), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-7.3.143>
- De Wit, J., Van Der Kraan, A., & Theeuwes, J. (2020). Live Streams on Twitch Help Viewers Cope With Difficult Periods in Life. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 586975. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.586975>
- Denzin, N. K. (1978). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1996). Handbook of qualitative research. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 28(2), 132.
- Dong, W. W., Wang, Y. Q., & Qin, J. (2022). An empirical study on impulse consumption intention of livestreaming e-commerce: The mediating effect of flow experience and the moderating effect of time pressure. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 1019024. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1019024>
- Drisko, J. W., & Maschi, T. (2016). *Content analysis*. Oxford University Press.
- Dunfee, T. W., Smith, N. C., & Ross, W. T. (1999). Social contracts and marketing ethics. *Journal of Marketing*, 63(3), 14-32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299906300302>
- Edwards, S. M., Lee, J. K., & Ferle, C. L. (2009). Does Place Matter When Shopping Online? Perceptions of Similarity and Familiarity as Indicators of Psychological Distance. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 10(1), 35-50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2009.10722161>
- Feng, C. (2024, September 27). *China fines influencer agency Three Sheep US\$9.8 million for 'made in Hong Kong' mooncakes*. South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/tech/policy/article/3280229/china-fines-influencer-agency-three-sheep-us98-million-made-hong-kong-mooncakes>
- Fisher, R. J. (1993). Social Desirability Bias and the Validity of Indirect Questioning. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(2), 303-315. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209351>
- Fiske, J. (2002). The cultural economy of fandom. In L. A. Lewis (Ed.), *The adoring audience* (pp. 30-49). Routledge.
- Frederick, E. L., Lim, C. H., Clavio, G., & Walsh, P. (2012). Why we follow: An examination of parasocial interaction and fan motivations for following athlete archetypes on Twitter. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 5(4), 481-502. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.5.4.481>
- Fu, J.-R., & Hsu, C.-W. (2023). Live-streaming shopping: The impacts of para-social interaction and local presence on impulse buying through shopping value. *Industrial Management & Data Systems*, 123(7), 1861-1886. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IMDS-03-2022-0171>
- Gandolfi, E. (2016). To watch or to play, it is in the game: The game culture on Twitch.tv among performers, plays and audiences. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 8(1), 63-82. https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.8.1.63_1
- Gao, X. (2023). How to Mediate the Healthy and Sustainable Development of Live Streaming Shopping. *Journal of Innovation and Development*, 5(2), 13-18. <https://doi.org/10.54097/jid.v5i2.03>
- Gaski, J. F. (1999). Does marketing ethics really have anything to say?—A critical inventory of the literature. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 18(3), 315-334. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1017190829683>
- Giertz, J. N., Weiger, W. H., Törhönen, M., & Hamari, J. (2022). Content versus community focus in live streaming services: how to drive engagement in synchronous social media. *Journal of Service Management*, 33(1), 33-58. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOSM-12-2020-0439>
- Gong, W., & Li, X. (2017). Engaging fans on microblog: the synthetic influence of parasocial interaction and source characteristics on celebrity endorsement. *Psychology & Marketing*, 34(7), 720-732. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21018>

- Gray, D. E. (2022). *Doing research in the real world* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Guba, E. G. (1990). The alternative paradigm dialog. In E. Guba (Ed.), *The paradigm dialog*. Sage.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In E. G. Guba (Ed.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Guo, Y., Zhang, K., & Wang, C. (2022). Way to success: Understanding top streamer's popularity and influence from the perspective of source characteristics. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 64, 102786. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102786>
- Hao, S., & Huang, L. (2023). How the time-scarcity feature of live-streaming e-commerce affects impulsive buying. *The Service Industries Journal*, 43(11-12), 875-895. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2023.2185231>
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2017). *The Practice of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Horton, D., & Richard Wohl, R. (1956). Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215-229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>
- Hou, F., Guan, Z., Li, B., & Chong, A. Y. L. (2020). Factors influencing people's continuous watching intention and consumption intention in live streaming. *Internet Research*, 30(1), 141-163. <https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-04-2018-0177>
- Hou, F., Li, B., Guan, Z., Chong, A. Y. L., & Phang, C. W. (2024). The role of para-social relationship in live streaming virtual gift purchase: A two-stage SEM-neural network analysis. *Internet Research*, 34(6), 2298-2340. <https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-09-2022-0709>
- Hsu, C.-L., Lin, J. C.-C., & Miao, Y.-F. (2020). Why are people loyal to live stream channels? The perspectives of uses and gratifications and media richness theories. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 23(5), 351-356. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2019.0547>
- Hu, H.-f., & Krishen, A. S. (2019). When is enough, enough? Investigating product reviews and information overload from a consumer empowerment perspective. *Journal of Business Research*, 100, 27-37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.03.011>
- Hu, M., & Chaudhry, S. S. (2020). Enhancing consumer engagement in e-commerce live streaming via relational bonds. *Internet Research*, 30(3), 1019-1041. <https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-03-2019-0082>
- Hu, M., Zhang, M., & Wang, Y. (2017). Why do audiences choose to keep watching on live video streaming platforms? An explanation of dual identification framework. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 75, 594-606. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.06.006>
- Hudson, L. A., & Ozanne, J. L. (1988). Alternative Ways of Seeking Knowledge in Consumer Research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14(4), 508-521. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209132>
- Humphreys, A., & Grayson, K. (2008). The intersecting roles of consumer and producer: A critical perspective on co-production, co-creation and prosumption. *Sociology Compass*, 2(3), 963-980. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2008.00112.x>
- Hwang, K., & Zhang, Q. (2018). Influence of parasocial relationship between digital celebrities and their followers on followers' purchase and electronic word-of-mouth intentions, and persuasion knowledge. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 87, 155-173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.05.029>

- Iqbal, M. (2024, November 07). *Twitch Revenue and Usage Statistics (2024)*. Business of Apps.
<https://www.businessofapps.com/data/twitch-statistics/>
- Javalgi, R. G., & Russell, L. T. M. (2018). International marketing ethics: A literature review and research agenda. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 148(4), 703-720. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2958-9>
- Jett, J., & Zhu, J. (2024, May 29). *China is banning 'wealth-9aunting' behavior on social media*. NBC News.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-banning-wealth-flaunting-behavior-social-media-rcna154240>
- Kamila, M. K., & Jasrotia, S. S. (2024). Ethics in marketing: Understanding past trends and future prospects through bibliometric analysis. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*, 1-32.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10495142.2024.2361345>
- Kharrati, K. (2023, October 18). *Global live streaming market size likely to grow at a CAGR of 28% By 2033*. Custom Market Insights. <https://www.custommarketinsights.com/press-releases/live-streaming-market-size/>
- Kim, J., & Song, H. (2016). Celebrity's self-disclosure on Twitter and parasocial relationships: A mediating role of social presence. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 62, 570-577.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.03.083>
- Kneisel, A., & Sternadori, M. (2022). Effects of parasocial affinity and gender on live streaming fans' motivations. *Convergence*, 29(2), 322-341. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221114461>
- Ko, H.-C. (2024). Factors affecting continued purchase intention in live streaming shopping: parasocial relationships and shared communication networks. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 43(11), 2488-2510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2023.2252099>
- Kohlbacher, F. (2006). The use of qualitative content analysis in case study research. *Forum qualitative sozialforschung/forum: Qualitative social research*, 7(1), 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-7.1.75>
- Kowert, R., & Bean, A. M. (2020). The Storytelling of Final Fantasy. In A. M. Bean (Ed.), *The Psychology of Final Fantasy: Surpassing the Limit Break* (pp. 9-19). Leyline Publishing.
- Kowert, R., & Daniel, E. (2021). The one-and-a-half sided parasocial relationship: The curious case of live streaming. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, 4, 100150.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2021.100150>
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Sage Publications.
- Kubacki, K., & Rundle-Thiele, S. (2016). *Formative research in social marketing: Innovative methods to gain consumer insights*. Springer.
- Labrecque, L. I. (2014). Fostering consumer–brand relationships in social media environments: The role of parasocial interaction. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 28(2), 134-148.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2013.12.003>
- Laczniak, G. R. (1999). Distributive justice, catholic social teaching, and the moral responsibility of marketers. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 18(1), 125-129.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/074391569901800114>

- Lawrence, C., & Meivitanli, B. (2023). The Role of Parasocial Relationships, Congruence and Source Credibility in Indonesia: A Study on Tiktok Live Streaming Commerce in the Cosmetics Industry. *Australasian Accounting, Business and Finance Journal*, 17(5), 39-51. <https://doi.org/10.14453/aabfj.v17i5.05>
- Lee, J. E., & Watkins, B. (2016). YouTube vloggers' influence on consumer luxury brand perceptions and intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(12), 5753-5760. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.04.171>
- Lee, S. H. (Mark), Simkins, T. J., Luster, S., & Chowdhury, S. A. (2018). Forgiving Sports Celebrities with Ethical Transgressions: The Role of Parasocial Relationships, Ethical Intent and Regulatory Focus Mindset. *Journal of Global Sport Management*, 3(2), 124–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24704067.2018.1441737>
- Leong, K. Y., Ho, J. S. Y., Tehseen, S., Yafi, E., & Cham, T.-H. (2024). The intangible values of live streaming and their effect on audience engagement. *Journal of Marketing Analytics*, 12(4), 990-1005. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41270-023-00247-1>
- Li, B., Hou, F., Guan, Z., & Chong, A. Y. L. (2018, June 26-30). What drives people to purchase virtual gifts in live streaming? The mediating role of flow. 22nd Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems-Opportunities and Challenges for the Digitized Society, Yokohama, Japan.
- Li, J., & Masri, A. L. (2023). Marketing manipulation: A literature review of its antecedents, mechanisms, outcomes and moderators. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Islamic Studies and Education (ARISE)*, 3(4), 69-81.
- Li, R., Lu, Y., Ma, J., & Wang, W. (2021). Examining gifting behavior on live streaming platforms: An identity-based motivation model. *Information & Management*, 58(6), 103406. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2020.103406>
- Li, Y., & Guo, Y. (2021). Virtual gifting and danmaku: What motivates people to interact in game live streaming? *Telematics and Informatics*, 62, 101624. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2021.101624>
- Li, Y., Kou, Y., Lee, J. S., & Kobsa, A. (2018). Tell me before you stream me: Managing information disclosure in video game live streaming. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 2(CSCW), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3274376>
- Liamputtong, P. (2020). *Qualitative research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Liang, H., & Shen, F. (2018). Birds of a schedule flock together: Social networks, peer influence, and digital activity cycles. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 82, 167-176. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.01.016>
- Liao, J., Chen, K., Qi, J., Li, J., & Yu, I. Y. (2023). Creating immersive and parasocial live shopping experience for viewers: the role of streamers' interactional communication style. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 17(1), 140-155. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIM-04-2021-0114>
- Lim, J. S., Choe, M.-J., Zhang, J., & Noh, G.-Y. (2020). The role of wishful identification, emotional engagement, and parasocial relationships in repeated viewing of live-streaming games: A social

- cognitive theory perspective. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 108, 106327.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106327>
- Lin, Y., Yao, D., & Chen, X. (2021). Happiness Begets Money: Emotion and Engagement in Live Streaming. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 58(3), 417-438.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00222437211002477>
- Liu, W., Wang, Z., Jian, L., & Sun, Z. (2024). How broadcasters' characteristics affect viewers' loyalty: the role of parasocial relationships. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 36(1), 241-259.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/APJML-10-2022-0856>
- Liu, X. S., Shi, Y., Xue, N. I., & Shen, H. (2022). The impact of time pressure on impulsive buying: The moderating role of consumption type. *Tourism Management*, 91, 104505.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2022.104505>
- Lo, P.-S., Dwivedi, Y. K., Wei-Han Tan, G., Ooi, K.-B., Cheng-Xi Aw, E., & Metri, B. (2022). Why do consumers buy impulsively during live streaming? A deep learning-based dual-stage SEM-ANN analysis. *Journal of Business Research*, 147, 325-337. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.04.013>
- Lou, C. (2022). Social media influencers and followers: Theorization of a trans-parasocial relation and explication of its implications for influencer advertising. *Journal of advertising*, 51(1), 4-21.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1880345>
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer Marketing: How Message Value and Credibility Affect Consumer Trust of Branded Content on Social Media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 19(1), 58-73.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>
- Lou, L., Jiao, Y., Jo, M. S., & Koh, J. (2022). How do popularity cues drive impulse purchase in live streaming commerce? The moderating role of perceived power. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 948634. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.948634>
- Lu, B., Wu, D., & Zhao, R. (2022). An investigation into factors affecting individuals' gifting intention in live streaming: a streamer-content perspective. *Journal of Electronic Business & Digital Economics*, 1(1/2), 90-110. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEBDE-04-2022-0007>
- Lu, Z., Xia, H., Heo, S., & Wigdor, D. (2018, April 21-26). You Watch, You Give, and You Engage: A Study of Live Streaming Practices in China. *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, Montreal QC, Canada.
- Lund, D. B. (2000). An empirical examination of marketing professionals' ethical behavior in differing situations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 24(4), 331-342. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006005823045>
- Luo, L., Hanyi, S., Zheng, Y., & Yuan, Y. (2024). To gift or not: Understanding gifting behavior on live streaming platforms from the perspective of social influence and herding. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10447318.2024.2368974>
- Ma, X., Zou, X., & Lv, J. (2022). Why do consumers hesitate to purchase in live streaming? A perspective of interaction between participants. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, 55, 101193.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.elerap.2022.101193>

- Manning, K. (1997). Authenticity in Constructivist Inquiry: Methodological Considerations Without Prescription. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(1), 93-115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780049700300105>
- Mason, J. (1996). *Qualitative researching*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- McKenna, L. (2022). Translation of research interviews: Do we have a problem with qualitative rigor? *Nurse Author & Editor*, 32(1), 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nae2.31>
- McLaughlin, C., & Wohn, D. Y. (2021). Predictors of parasocial interaction and relationships in live streaming. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1714-1734. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211027807>
- Meng, L., Duan, S., Zhao, Y., Lü, K., & Chen, S. (2021). The impact of online celebrity in livestreaming E-commerce on purchase intention from the perspective of emotional contagion. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 63, 102733. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102733>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Mills, J., Bonner, A., & Francis, K. (2006). The Development of Constructivist Grounded Theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 25-35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500103>
- Ming, J., Jianqiu, Z., Bilal, M., Akram, U., & Fan, M. (2021). How social presence influences impulse buying behavior in live streaming commerce? The role of S-O-R theory. *International Journal of Web Information Systems*, 17(4), 300-320. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJWIS-02-2021-0012>
- Moedeem, S., Aw, E. C.-X., Alryalat, M., Wei-Han Tan, G., Cham, T.-H., Ooi, K.-B., & Dwivedi, Y. K. (2024). Social media marketing in the digital age: Empower consumers to win big? *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 36(1), 66-84. <https://doi.org/10.1108/APJML-09-2022-0784>
- Morgan, D. L. (1993). Qualitative Content Analysis: A Guide to Paths not Taken. *Qualitative Health Research*, 3(1), 112-121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973239300300107>
- Mortensen, C. R., & Cialdini, R. B. (2020). Compliance and social psychology. In B. G. Knight (Ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Psychology and Aging*. Oxford University Press.
- Moussaïd, M., Kämmer, J. E., Analytis, P. P., & Neth, H. (2013). Social influence and the collective dynamics of opinion formation. *PloS One*, 8(11), e78433. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0078433>
- Murphy, P. E. (2017). Research in marketing ethics: Continuing and emerging themes. *Recherche et Applications en Marketing (English Edition)*, 32(3), 84-89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2051570717701414>
- Murphy, P. E., & Laczniak, G. R. (1993). *Ethical marketing decisions: The higher road*. Allyn and Bacon.
- Null, A., & Schibrowsky, J. A. (2007). Research on marketing ethics: A systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 27(3), 256-273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146707304733>

- Park, H. J., & Lin, L. M. (2020). The effects of match-ups on the consumer attitudes toward internet celebrities and their live streaming contents in the context of product endorsement. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 52, 101934. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.101934>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sage publications.
- Patton Quinn, M. (2002). Qualitative research & evaluation methods. In: Sage Publication Ltd.
- Pich, C., & Dean, D. (2015). Qualitative projective techniques in political brand image research from the perspective of young adults. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 18(1), 115-144. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-12-2012-0058>
- Pope, C., & Mays, N. (2020). *Qualitative research in health care*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Porter, S. (1993). Nursing research conventions: Objectivity or obfuscation? *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 18(1), 137-143. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1993.18010137.x>
- Qiu, L., Chen, X., & Lee, T. J. (2021). How can the celebrity endorsement effect help consumer engagement? A case of promoting tourism products through live streaming. *Sustainability*, 13(15), 8655. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13158655>
- Quan, Z. (2024, May 14). *Major influencers who flaunt wealth see their online accounts suspended*. China Daily. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202405/24/WS664fef4ba31082fc043c8dee.html>
- Rolfe, G. (2006). Validity, trustworthiness and rigour: quality and the idea of qualitative research. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 53(3), 304-310. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2006.03727.x>
- Rungruangjit, W. (2022). What drives Taobao live streaming commerce? The role of parasocial relationships, congruence and source credibility in Chinese consumers' purchase intentions. *Heliyon*, 8(6), e09676. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e09676>
- Rusk, R. D., Vella-Brodrick, D. A., & Waters, L. (2015). Components of Appreciative Functioning: A Thematic Analysis of Relevant Literature and Content Analysis of Existing Measurement Scales. *Psychology of Well-Being*, 5(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13612-015-0028-9>
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 23(4), 334-340. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X\(200008\)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X(200008)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G)
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research methods for business students* (8th ed.). Pearson.
- Schlegelmilch, B. B., & Öberseder, M. (2010). Half a century of marketing ethics: Shifting perspectives and emerging trends. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 93(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-009-0182-1>
- Shao, Z. (2024). How the characteristics of social media influencers and live content influence consumers' impulsive buying in live streaming commerce? The role of congruence and attachment. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 18(3), 506-527. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIM-08-2023-0277>
- Shen, Z., Zhang, M., Liu, Y., & Zhang, T. (2023). Development and regulatory trends of China's online live streaming industry. *Law and Economy*, 2(10), 55-60. <https://doi.org/10.56397/LE.2023.10.07>
- Shi, Y., Ma, C., & Zhu, Y. (2021). The Impact of Emotional Labor on User Stickiness in the Context of Livestreaming Service-Evidence From China. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 698510. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.698510>

- Shou, M., Yu, J., & Dai, R. (2023). Identify the effect of government regulations on the live streaming e-commerce. *Industrial Management & Data Systems*, 123(11), 2909-2928.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/IMDS-10-2022-0655>
- Simon, R. J., & Simon, J. L. (1974). Money Incentives and Family Size: A Hypothetical-Question Study. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 38(4), 585-595. <https://doi.org/10.1086/268185>
- Sjöblom, M., Törhönen, M., Hamari, J., & Macey, J. (2019). The ingredients of Twitch streaming: Affordances of game streams. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 92, 20-28.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.10.012>
- Smith, A. (2006). Cognitive Empathy and Emotional Empathy in Human Behavior and Evolution. *The Psychological Record*, 56(1), 3-21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03395534>
- Smith, A. N., & Cooper-Martin, E. (2018). Advertising and manipulation: A conceptual framework for understanding the issue. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 149(3), 745-755.
- Smith, N. C. (2001). Ethical guidelines for marketing practice: A reply to Gaski & some observations on the role of normative marketing ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 32(1), 3-18.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010685524206>
- Song, W., & Fox, J. (2016). Playing for Love in a Romantic Video Game: Avatar Identification, Parasocial Relationships, and Chinese Women's Romantic Beliefs. *Mass Communication and Society*, 19(2), 197-215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2015.1077972>
- Song, S., Xu, Y., Ma, B., & Zong, X. (2024). Understanding how streamer's self-presentation in e-commerce live streaming affects consumers: The role of persuasion knowledge. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 19(3), 1922-1942. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer19030095>
- Sun, J., Dushime, H., & Zhu, A. (2022). Beyond beauty: A qualitative exploration of authenticity and its impacts on Chinese consumers' purchase intention in live commerce. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 944607. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.944607>
- Sun, L. (2018). *Should You Chase Huya's Post-IPO Really?* Yahoo!Finance.
https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/chase-huya-apos-post-ipo-213000096.html?guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAANb-78y2kBmwCpalA2mcvJgTohRxHm1Fjmr6ajQf_p45hxJK8oLvdF4ICJ693cDm-yXYARK0nhhIzQoYrfDp6hHoAyieYCTQoxFjTTuiN02JXPvs&guccounter=1
- Sun, Y., Shao, X., Li, X., Guo, Y., & Nie, K. (2019). How live streaming influences purchase intentions in social commerce: An IT affordance perspective. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, 37, 100886. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.elerap.2019.100886>
- Swedberg, R. (2020). Exploratory research. In C. Elman, J. Gerring, & J. Mahoney (Eds.), *The production of knowledge: Enhancing progress in social science* (Vol. 2, pp. 17-41). Cambridge University Press.
- Thomala, L. L. (2024, May 10). *Time spent watching online video in China 2016-2025*. Statista.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/738877/china-online-video-viewing-time/>

- Thompson, C. J., Rindfleisch, A., & Arsel, Z. (2006). Emotional Branding and the Strategic Value of the Doppelgänger Brand Image. *Journal of Marketing*, 70(1), 50-64.
<https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.70.1.050.qxd>
- Tsalikis, J., & Fritzsche, D. J. (1989). Business ethics: A literature review with a focus on marketing ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 8(9), 695-743. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25071957>
- Wade, M. (2020, April 28). *Corporate social responsibility in the digital era*. MIT Sloan Management Review. <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/corporate-responsibility-in-the-digital-era/>
- Wan, A., & Wu, L. (2020). Understanding the negative consequences of watching social live streaming among Chinese viewers. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 5311-5330.
- Wan, J., Lu, Y., Wang, B., & Zhao, L. (2017). How attachment influences users' willingness to donate to content creators in social media: A socio-technical systems perspective. *Information & Management*, 54(7), 837-850. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2016.12.007>
- Wang, B., Tong, C., Chen, T., Yang, J., & Cong, G. (2024). Evaluation of China's live streaming e-commerce industry policies based on a three-dimensional analysis framework. *PloS One*, 19(5), e0301451. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0301451>
- Wang, C., & Wang, L. (2021, May 28). The Influence of Live Streamer Morality on Consumer Purchase Intentions from the Perspective of Identity. WHICEB 2021 Proceedings,
- Wang, X., Yu, C., & Wei, Y. (2012). Social Media Peer Communication and Impacts on Purchase Intentions: A Consumer Socialization Framework. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 26(4), 198-208. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2011.11.004>
- Wang, Y. (2024). Exploration of the problem of selling counterfeits in live marketing. *Journal of New Media and Economics*, 1(1), 31-36.
- Whysall, P. (2000). Marketing ethics—An overview. *The Marketing Review*, 1(2), 175-195. <https://doi.org/10.1362/1469347002529152>
- Wohn, D. Y., Freeman, G., & McLaughlin, C. (2018, April 21-26). Explaining Viewers' Emotional, Instrumental, and Financial Support Provision for Live Streamers. Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Montreal QC, Canada.
- Wongkitrungrueng, A., & Assarut, N. (2020). The role of live streaming in building consumer trust and engagement with social commerce sellers. *Journal of Business Research*, 117, 543-556. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.08.032>
- Wu, Q., Sang, Y., Wang, D., & Lu, Z. (2021, November 08). *Malicious selling strategies in E-Commerce Livestream: A case study of Alibaba's Taobao and ByteDance's TikTok*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2111.10491>
- Wu, Y., Gui, X., Wisniewski, P. J., & Li, Y. (2023). Do streamers care about bystanders' privacy? An examination of live streamers' considerations and strategies for bystanders' privacy management. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 7(CSCW1), 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3579603>

- Wu, Y., Li, Y., & Gui, X. (2022). "I Am Concerned, But...": Streamers' Privacy Concerns and Strategies In Live Streaming Information Disclosure. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 6(CSCW2), 1-31. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3555104>
- Wu, Y., Xin, L., Li, D., Yu, J., & Guo, J. (2021). How does scarcity promotion lead to impulse purchase in the online market? A field experiment. *Information & Management*, 58(1), 103283. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2020.103283>
- Xiao, P. (2024). The rise of livestreaming e-commerce in China and challenges for regulation: A critical examination of a landmark case occurring during COVID-19 pandemic. *Computer Law & Security Review*, 52, 105955. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clsr.2024.105955>
- Yang, Q., Huo, J., Li, H., Xi, Y., & Liu, Y. (2023). Can social interaction-oriented content trigger viewers' purchasing and gift-giving behaviors? Evidence from live-streaming commerce. *Internet Research*, 33(7), 46-71. <https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-11-2021-0861>
- Yang, S. (2023, June 28). Current Situation and Digital Development Trend of E-Commerce Live Streaming in China. Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Economic Management and Green Development, Singapore.
- Yang, Y., & Ha, L. (2021). Why People Use TikTok (Douyin) and How Their Purchase Intentions Are Affected by Social Media Influencers in China: A Uses and Gratifications and Parasocial Relationship Perspective. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 21(3), 297-305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2021.1995544>
- Ye, Z., Dong, C., & Kavka, M. (2023). Navigating the economy of ambivalent intimacy: gender and relational labour in China's livestreaming industry. *Feminist Media Studies*, 23(7), 3384-3400. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2112736>
- Yi, K. (2020, December 15). *Top Kuaishou Live Streamer Xinba Caught Selling Fake Products*. China Marketing Insights. <https://chinamktginsights.com/top-kuaishou-live-streamer-xinba-caught-selling-fake-products/>
- Yıldırım, E., Mert, K., & Cebeci, H. İ. (2021). Comprehensive review of the marketing ethics literature: A bibliometric approach. *Is Ahlakı Dergisi*, 14(2), 242-269. <https://doi.org/10.12711/tjbe.2021.14.2.2176>
- Yu, W. (2023). Research on the problems and strategies of live-streaming e-commerce on the Douyin Platform in China. *Highlights in Business, Economics and Management*, 23, 762-769.
- Zafar, A. U., Qiu, J., & Shahzad, M. (2020). Do digital celebrities' relationships and social climate matter? Impulse buying in f-commerce. *Internet Research*, 30(6), 1731-1762. <https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-04-2019-0142>
- Zhang, H., Lu, Y., Gupta, S., & Zhao, L. (2014). What motivates customers to participate in social commerce? The impact of technological environments and virtual customer experiences. *Information & Management*, 51(8), 1017-1030. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2014.07.005>

- Zhang, J. (2021, October 22-24). Research on the Current Situation and Future Trend of Web Celebrity E-commerce Live Streaming Industry. 2021 3rd International Conference on Economic Management and Cultural Industry (ICEMCI 2021), Guangzhou, China.
- Zhang, J., Qi, S., & Lyu, B. (2021). A receiver perspective on knowledge sharing impact on consumer-brand relationship in virtual communities. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 685959. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.685959>
- Zhang, M., Liu, Y., Wang, Y., & Zhao, L. (2022). How to retain customers: Understanding the role of trust in live streaming commerce with a socio-technical perspective. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *127*, 107052. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.107052>
- Zhang, Q., Wang, Y., & Ariffin, S. K. (2024). Consumers purchase intention in live-streaming e-commerce: A consumption value perspective and the role of streamer popularity. *PloS One*, *19*(2), e0296339. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0296339>
- Zhang, X., Xiang, Y., & Hao, L. (2019). Virtual gifting on China's live streaming platforms: hijacking the online gift economy. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, *12*(3), 340-355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2019.1583260>
- Zhang, Y., Sun, Y., & Wang, N. (2024). Understanding the determinants of gifting and social sharing in live streaming: a dual-attachment perspective. *Industrial Management & Data Systems*, *124*(2), 564-582. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IMDS-06-2023-0380>
- Zhang, Z., Zhang, N., & Wang, J. (2022). The influencing factors on impulse buying behavior of consumers under the mode of hunger marketing in live commerce. *Sustainability*, *14*(4), 2122. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14042122>
- Zheng, R., Li, Z., & Na, S. (2022). How customer engagement in the live-streaming affects purchase intention and customer acquisition, E-tailer's perspective. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *68*, 103015. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2022.103015>

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethics Approval

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology

D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ

T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316

E: ethics@aut.ac.nz

www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

27 May 2024

Crystal Yap

Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Crystal

Re Ethics Application: **24/121 Challenges in upholding ethical standards within live streaming:
Insights from practitioners**

Thank you for your responses to AUTEC's conditions.

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 26 May 2027.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research and as approved by AUTEC.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTEC approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTEC, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.

All forms are available online <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

For any enquiries, please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEK Secretariat

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: mjp4097@autuni.ac.nz

PARTICIPATION INVITATION TO A RESEARCH ON ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN LIVE STREAMING

Greetings! My name is Bohan Fan, a postgraduate student in the Marketing and International Business Department at Auckland University of Technology.

This research is about ethical dilemmas in live streaming.

If you are over 20 years old, with at least 2 years of experience in the social media marketing industry and have engaged in live streaming, we welcome you to join this research.

I am hoping that the study findings can also help you as a live streamer or social media experts.

You will have access to the results of the research which you may use to promote responsible and ethical practices in live streaming marketing.

NOTE: *This is an academic research project and there are no commercial interests involved. If you have any issues or concerns, please let me know. No private information or names will be shared in the research outputs. Your consent is voluntary.*

For more information, or to express your interest in participation, please contact me at:
Bohan Fan, Marketing and International Business Department, AUT Business School
Auckland University of Technology
Email: mjp4097@autuni.ac.nz

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

21 April 2024

Project Title

Challenges in upholding ethical standards within live streaming: Insights from practitioners

An Invitation

Welcome! Thank you for considering taking part in this research. I am Bohan Fan, a postgraduate student in the Marketing and International Business department at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). This research is about challenges in upholding ethical standards within live streaming. I would like to invite you to participate in this research. The interviews conducted as part of this research will contribute to the completion of my Master of Business in Marketing thesis. Participation in this research is voluntary, and all information collected will be kept confidential. You may withdraw your participation at any time before the completion of the research project without any effect on your rights. As a gesture of gratitude for your participation, you will be offered a \$30 gift voucher at the end of the interview.

What is the purpose of this research?

The research purpose of this study is to investigate issue relating to ethical standards and dilemmas within live streaming. Ethical standards are the guiding principles that dictate how individuals and organizations should behave in various contexts, covering aspects such as honesty and transparency, responsible content that aligns with community guidelines and legal requirements, respect for privacy, and equitable treatment. In live streaming context, ethical dilemmas may arise when content creators are faced with conflicting moral considerations, such as balancing the desire to engage viewers with the responsibility to maintain honesty and transparency, resulting in tensions regarding what actions to take. This study particularly aims to explore the tensions between commercial interests and expectations of ethical and social responsibility standards, as perceived by industry experts. With this understanding, this study seeks to identify corroborative initiatives and strategies aimed at promoting ethical practices in live streaming.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have been invited to participate in this research as you are aged 20 and above, and have minimum 2 years of experience in social media marketing industry especially on the live streaming business.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

You can agree to participate in this research by confirming your interest in an email to myself bohan.fan@aut.ac.nz. If you agree to participate in this research, please sign the consent form and

email it back to me at bohan.fan@aut.ac.nz. Alternatively, you may wish to give oral consent at the start of our interview.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible. What will happen in this research?

An interview schedule will be emailed so that you can choose a date and time for the interview of approximately 90-120 minutes online via communication tools such as Teams, WeChat, Tencent Meeting or Zoom meeting . This session will be audio-recorded, and I will also be writing notes. Questions and discussions conducted here will relate to your existing knowledge, practices, and experiences on your views on ethical dilemmas in live streaming. After the interview, the transcript will be offered to you for confirmation. All information you provide will remain confidential, and only pseudonyms will be used in the final reporting. You will not be able to be identified in any of the findings and discussions that may be part of research outcomes i.e., conference papers and journal articles.

What are the discomforts and risks?

Participants will be answering questions related to the ethical dilemmas in live streaming during interviews. For example, shares their perception towards and past experiences of facing an ethical dilemma within live streaming context. These questions may make participants feel low-level discomfort or embarrassment. The interview schedule and place will be adjusted based on your availability and convenience.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

Participation is totally voluntary. You can choose not to answer any question that you feel comfortable or embarrassing, and you can withdraw from the research at any point without facing any consequences. The research questions will be framed in a way that encourages you to share their experiences and perspective without feeling judged or embarrassed. The primary researcher will approach you with sensitivity and empathy, being mindful of personal beliefs and emotional responses.

What are the benefits?

By uncovering the ethical dilemmas associated with balancing commercial interests with responsible live streaming, this study anticipates identifying collaborative initiatives and partnerships to promote responsible and ethical practices in live streaming marketing. This can further help live streamers improve user engagement and the stickiness of audiences. Additionally,

the findings can aid social media marketers in developing ethical strategies for content creation, enhancing brand perception and consumer trust.

How will my privacy be protected?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your identity remains confidential and will not be disclosed to anyone except the primary researcher and the research supervisor. To ensure that privacy and the suggested confidentiality are respected, your name will be changed to a pseudonym and contact information will not be disclosed in final reporting. Any information gathered from interviews will be used solely for academic purposes, and any published findings will not include any identifying information. The interview recordings will be deleted from the interview platform or phone back-up after analysis has been completed and conserved in separate AUT managed storage. The personal data and other data such as interview recordings; transcripts and consent forms will be separately stored in the password-protected OneDrive Cloud. Only the primary researcher, Bohan Fan, and the supervisor, Associate Professor Crystal Yap, will have access to the data.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

Participating in the interview will not incur any expenses for you; the only investment required is your time. The interview is expected to last between 90 to 120 minutes in total.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Feel free to consider whether you'd like to take part in the interview at your own pace. Your response within three weeks of receiving this invitation would be greatly appreciated.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

You have the option to check a box on the Consent Form if you'd like to receive feedback regarding a summary of the research findings. An email containing a synopsis of the results will be sent to you after the research concludes.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Crystal Yap, crystal.yap@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext. 5800.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, ethics@aut.ac.nz , (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Bohan Fan, bohan.fan@aut.ac.nz; +64 274756267

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Associate Professor Crystal Yap, crystal.yap@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext. 5800.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on May 27 2024, AUTECH
Reference number 24/121.

Appendix D: Consent Form

For use when interviews are involved.

Project title: Challenges in upholding ethical standards within live streaming: Insights from practitioners

Project Supervisor: Associate Professor Crystal Yap

Researcher: Bohan Fan

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 21 April 2024.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant’s signature:

.....

Participant’s name:

.....

Participant’s Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

.....

.....

.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on May 27 2024, AUTEK Reference number Yap24/121.

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form

Appendix E: Interview Guide

Indicative interview questions (First in-depth interview):

Opening:

- Greeting
- Explain the purpose of this interview
- Brief the participants about the interview e.g. how long does this interview take, encourage more participation from them, mention that there is no right or wrong answer and we are interested in their opinions, etc
- Ask for the permission to record the interview [reminder: record on Teams + phone as backup]

Warm up questions

- How long have you been involved in live streaming
- What does your current work typically involve?
 - Do you recommend that your client or company incorporate live streaming into their marketing campaign?
 - What inspires (or motivates) you to work as a live streamer? Or what do you think motivate people to become a live streamer?
- Can you provide an overview of your understanding of the live streaming?

Thematic Appreciation Test

- Present participant the pictures of live streaming
- How do you think the streamer will introduce the product to viewers in this scenario?
- How do you think the streamer interacts with the viewers during this live stream?
- How do you think the viewer will react to the streamer?

Main questions:

- What kind of tactics do you think are effective in live streaming to encourage consumers to take action, for example, purchase products or giving money?
 - Regarding the XXX tactics you mentioned, how do you think they affect the trust and credibility you have with your followers/audiences?
 - How do you view the level of transparency typically observed in these situations?
- What are your views on the current ethical standards in live streaming? and what significance does it hold?
 - Can you elaborate on what you mean by "ethical standards" in this context?

- Do you think the ethical standards in live streaming differ depending on the region or platform?
- How do you think these ethical standards affect the trust viewers place in live streamers or channels?
- What impact do you believe these standards have on the overall success of live streaming as an industry?
- In your opinion, what are the key principles or values that should guide ethical behaviors in live streaming?
- Could you share any instances where you've observed any behaviours or practices in live streaming that you consider unethical? Probe:
 - What specific practices did the live streamer take?
 - ◆ Who were the key parties involved, and what roles did they play?
 - ◆ How did the audience respond to this behaviour during or after the live stream?
 - Prompt participants to reflect on more instances and ask participants to compare and contrast different instances they've observed;
 - Prompt participants to reflect on how they feel about it;
- Based on the instances, what do you think influenced their decision? Or What do you think motivates individuals to engage in unethical practices in live streaming?
 - Are there particular circumstances or triggers that you think push individuals toward such actions?
 - Are there any reward systems or performance metrics in the industry that could unintentionally promote unethical practices?
 - Are there any industry trends or norms that unintentionally encourage unethical practices?
 - Do you think individuals engage in these practices because they believe the chances of being caught are low?
- Why do you think these unethical practices are effective or “work” in the live streaming context?
 - How does the relationship between live streamers and their followers impact ethical practices?
 - How do viewer expectations or demands contribute to unethical practices?
 - Do you think certain platform features or tools contribute to unethical practices?
 - Can you discuss any regulatory frameworks or industry guidelines that address unethical issues in live streaming?

- Can you provide examples of specific regulatory frameworks or industry guidelines that you are familiar with, which address the ethical challenges in live streaming?
- In your experience, how do current regulatory frameworks adequately address the ethical complexities of live streaming, or do you see areas for improvement?
- Are there any legal or systemic loopholes that enable or encourage unethical behaviour?

Conclusion:

- Thank the subjects for their participation

- Ask if they have any questions and anything else they would like to say

- Present the gift/voucher to the participants if the interview is conducted face to face, or inform the participants that an online gift card will send to them by email later.

-I really appreciate the time you have spent with me today. Do you have anything else you would like me to know? Do you have any questions for me? I think that's all for my questions.. Thank you again! Have a great day!

Appendix F: Thematic Appreciation Test



