

# Gamer perception of endorsements from FortNite Streamers on YouTube

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# GAMER PERCEPTION OF ENDORSEMENTS FROM FORTNITE STREAMERS ON YOUTUBE

## ABSTRACT

With an ever-increasing market valuation within the video games industry free-to-play games are becoming more interesting for researchers. These types of games have no cost to play but seem to generate substantial amounts of revenue. One associated cause of this is the simultaneous rise in popularity of video game streamers. Video game streamers have been considered a form of influencer and have become interesting for researchers in this field to study. However very little of this research has been focused on the intersection between free-to-play games and streamers, or how gamers as consumers perceive product endorsements in their favorite streamers videos on YouTube or Twitch. This research focused on FortNite as the free-to-play game due to its success in the monetization process as well as its rapid growth in popularity since its release in 2017 to becoming one of the top Battle Royale competitive games across gaming platforms. As such the following research provides a new avenue for insights into gamer's perceptions of streamers YouTube videos specifically exploring how players perceive streamers as influencers and how these internal perceptions shape their experience of the streamers videos and their own gameplay. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted revealing that gamers perceive streamers in 3 distinct ways, as entertainers, an inspiration to play and as endorsers. Streamers are perceived as entertainers by showcasing high-level gameplay. Gamers consume this content because it is perceived as fun, relaxing, and an engaging way to learn. Streamers are an inspiration to play by inspiring competition, collaboration, curiosity and commitment in gamers through their expertise in showcasing the game. Finally gamers perceive streamers as endorsers through their videos as skins are perceived as giving social status, the battle pass is perceived to provide rewards, skin choice is highlighted in the player's game, and new game mechanics are promoted. The practical implications of this research and links to existing theory are discussed as well as new possible avenues for research into the topic of free-to-play gaming and influencer marketing.

KEYWORDS: *Free-to-Play gaming, Gamer perception, Influencer marketing, FortNite, Video Game Streamers*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As content creators grow in popularity for both companies as source of promotion and consumers, as a source of entertainment, the need to understand how audiences perceive their content creators is critical. This is even more needed in the field of game studies as the time spent watching gamers play increases and viewers are more exposed to subtle forms of advertising. Therefore the following research seeks to expand knowledge in the field of game studies and influencer marketing by exploring how FortNite gamers construct their perception of their favorite streamers in relation to the game itself and the virtual goods sold in the games online store. Streamers are gamers that showcase their gaming live, and they along with gamers who showcase post game footage could be considered as influencers because their content is viewed by others and exacts some change in their opinion. The connotation of the word streamer has changed in the last 5 years, an example of this would be PewDiePie, a Swedish born YouTuber, who confessed “My parents said that sitting at home playing video games all day won't bring you anywhere in life” (PewDiePie Quotes, n.d.). Now, PewDiePie has over 86 million subscribers and gained fame through his Let’s Play videos, videos of him gaming and providing comedic commentary. This streamer is seen as the spark for the increase of videogame streaming as he popularized the movement. The perception of gaming as being private, anti social behavior and only desirable by a small number of individuals changed. Gaming became more mainstream and inclusive and a source of entertainment to watch as well as play.

What was once considered a simple way to pass the time has become a massive industry generating \$137.9 Billion in 2018 with mobile gaming generating 51% of revenue and PC and console gaming generating 24% and 25% of the total annual revenue respectively. The industry has seen impressive increases in valuation and is predicted to reach a value of approximately \$180 Billion in 2021 (Sinclair, 2018). The industry has developed to accommodate the rise of streamers; gamers who post their gameplay in real time for others to watch, and professional Esports players who compete in large scale tournaments in teams or individually for prize money. The effort put into creating games has spurred the new wave of perceiving games as an art form, in some cases being displayed in museums to connect with younger audiences (de Vos, Glas & van Vught, 2017) such as the Art of Video Games exhibit in 2012 hosted by the Smithsonian (Kohler, 2018), which featured classic games such as Pac Man (1980) and Super Mario (1985). Video games have

become tools to tell vivid and immersive stories, with some games winning multiple awards. Games like Bioshock (2007) drew on works by dystopian writers such as Orwell to produce a deep game world that goes beyond merely entertaining players (Parissis, 2018)

For this research the focus will be on free-to-play games, which are games that you do not have to pay to own or progress in. These games tend to attract a large number of users and were responsible for 80% of digital game revenue in 2018, majority of this being sourced from mobile gaming platforms (Strickland, 2019). Free-to-play games represent a new disruptive force to the standard gaming business model that needs to be understood before companies can leverage it. Free-to-play games reduce barriers to entry because they have no cost and so can appeal to the maximum amount of consumers who would never have purchased this game with actual money. Secondly these kinds of games are typically simpler and are in some cases easier to pick up. These games also feature some form of social system where gamers interact with each other, creating a deeper game world and more incentives for gamers to play. Monetization of free-to-play business models occurs in a number of ways being; membership fees, season passes or in-game item purchases. These revenue streams can be considered secondary products that gamers choose to purchase depending on their needs and the type of gamer they are. FortNite is currently the most popular multi-platform free-to-play games; streamers' content on this game has been selected as the main focus of analysis for this research. A study conducted by LendEDU found that approximately 69% of FortNite players have purchased in-game items; however most do not know these items do not give an in-game advantage (Batchelor, 2018).

Much like regular products, virtual products can be marketed and advertised through the use of influencers or streamers. Game design also plays a role in creating demand for these virtual goods, by either giving incentives for purchase such as improvements to gameplay or by appealing to the gamers tastes with aesthetics (Hamari, 2015; Hamari, Alha, Järvelä, Kivikangas, Koivisto, & Paavilainen, 2017). These virtual products follow the same macroeconomic principles as real world goods such as demand and supply (Castronova, Williams, Shen, Ratan, Xiong, Huang, & Keegan, 2009). Players have even mimicked black market trading practices in certain games allowing for more freedoms while trading with other players, in some cases the value of these items translated to real world value as well. However as companies moved towards a free-to-play system with an in-game store, these transactions became monitored and fair (Lin & Sun, 2011). Virtual products come in two forms for free-to-play games, functional props that can modify gameplay and decorative

props that are purely aesthetic. Functional props allow gamers with little time and extra money to progress faster in a game and are perceived as less fair than decorative props that do not affect gameplay (Lin & Sun, 2007). In the case of FortNite, only decorative props are available which is another reason for its popularity due to perceived trueness to being 100% free-to-play.

As mentioned previously, streamers are gamers who showcase their gameplay online for others to view. Streaming made its first debut in 2014 with the first twitch stream, Twitch plays Pokemon, earning a record 55 million streams in just over a month (Bonilla, 2017). In 2015 as the popularity of streaming increased ESPN broadcasted a Heroes of the Dorm competition between Arizona state university and Berkeley (Burroughs & Rama, 2015). And now DOTA gamers compete for a prize pool of over \$25 million with stream numbers reaching over 65 million (Escharts.com, 2019). Streaming has become popular because it is simultaneously a form of entertainment but also a form of social interaction where gamers can engage with the community of games they like, and improve their own gameplay. Due to the rise in popularity of streaming, some streamers have risen to amass followings in the millions such as Ninja with a YouTube subscriber count of 21 million (NinjasHyper, 2018). Streamers provide gamers with information on the latest game updates, new game mechanics as well as generally determine the most effective strategies in-game, often referred to as The Meta. Streamers provide commentary on items within the game and depending on the popularity of the streamer and how close to the streamer a gamer is, the believability of the message will change. With such large numbers of views it is clear that these streamers exact a large amount of influence over viewers, giving relevance to their possible impacts, which should be studied.

The act of gaming has changed from an individual activity to incorporate social elements, in which gamers share their experiences with others through social networks as well as in the game. Within the game players can team up and meet new players as they are brought together by a shared activity. In certain massive online role playing games complex guilds or groups of players can be formed and given legitimacy through rank, which incentivizes players to spend more time in the game to improve their guild. The social aspect is not confined to elements within the game. The gameplay itself becomes a source of amusement for potential viewers as superior gameplay entices viewers to watch streams in one sense to improve their own game in another sense to consume entertainment from the streaming gamer themselves (Glas, 2015). In this sense gamers become influencers, “people

with a sizeable social media following and who are trusted in several niches” (Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017, p. 798). These gamers not only provide entertainment to viewers but also have the capacity to shift attitudes within other gamers as opinion leaders, which makes them interesting for brands to engage with for promotion (Goldsmith & Clark, 2008). The two spheres of gaming and influencer marketing are becoming increasingly linked, with evidence of this being a recent event by Dj Marshmellow, who gave a virtual concert within the free-to-play game FortNite in which 10 million concurrent players attended, hinting at the possible future for augmented reality experiences within video games (Rubin, 2019). Other cases of influencer marketing and gaming can be found in EA’s famous FIFA series that showcases the top football player for that year on the cover.

FortNite (2017) is a battle royale style game in which 100 players drop down into a map or battleground and have to source their own weapons and armor. Players only have one life and therefore the focus is on survival, choosing your battles and building structures to aid you to victory. FortNite (2017) is not the first battle royale style game but its building feature, cartoon art style and gameplay set it apart from the rest, resulting in its massive success today. The popular battle royale game debuted in 2017, just a year after PlayerUnknown's battleground was released, and works on a seasonal content model which typically lasts 90 days. Since inception, the creators of FortNite, Epic Games have managed to generate hype around the game through several key events. One such event is when Musician Drake teamed up with FortNite streamer Ninja on twitch to what would become the most streamed video on the platform, an interest it has managed to sustain. This brought FortNite into the daily lives of many people aside from gamers dramatically increasing its popularity. Epic Games also capitalized on the hype around the Avengers Infinity War by introducing Thanos, the key antagonist of the Avengers movie franchise, as a limited time playable game enhancement (Petty, 2018).

FortNite has seen stable growth and even with the addition of new entrants has maintained a substantial following of 200 million players, generating revenue of \$2.4 billion in 2018 (Smith, 2019), the largest annual revenue for a game in history. FortNite’s player base follows general trends in the gaming industry with a majority of 80% of PC players being male and in the 18-25 year age group (Iqbal, 2019). The game is currently available on all platforms including mobile which is said to help address the gender imbalance, however in this research the focus will be on PC and console players as these are considered to be more hardcore gamers as opposed to casual gamers. Hardcore gamers are more invested in

the game and more likely to seek information on game from streamers (Poels, Annema, Verstraete, Zaman, & Grooff, 2012).

### **Research Question**

Taking all of the above into consideration, it is clear that the video game industry is changing and that streaming is one of the factors leading this change. The rising popularity of free-to-play games and the streamers of these games present interesting opportunities for companies who would want to leverage streamers in marketing strategies for their video games. However it is the subtle phenomenon in the behavior of gamers involving their perception that could provide even greater insights for product marketing.

Therefore in order to understand how streamers shape the perception of gamers and their experience of the game the following research question is formed:

*How do FortNite gamers perceive in-game item's endorsements in streamers' YouTube videos?*

This question can be further broken down into three smaller sub questions being

*SQ1: How do gamers perceive streamers content?*

*SQ2: How are streamers perceived as source of inspiration or motivation to play?*

*SQ3: How do gamers perceive in-game items' use and discussion in streamer's YouTube videos?*

In order to understand how gamers perceive in-game item endorsements, we need to first understand how a streamer's content is perceived. SQ1 helps develop an understanding of how gamers perceive streamer's content in general and whether this changes for each gamer. This is useful for marketers to know so as to better position influencers and products. Once we understand how the content is perceived we then need to understand how this content serves as an inspiration to play. SQ2 helps answer this question by examining how gamers perceive motivations to play from streamers videos. A game designer can then strategically use these motivations to encourage more play. Finally once we understand why gamers play the game we can understand how the in-game items are used, discussed and perceived. SQ3

helps answer this by examining what draws gamers to in-game items as well as how streamers shape these perceptions.

### **Social Relevance**

Free-to-play games are a rising category of games that produce the majority of digital game revenue, approximately 80% of \$109 Billion in 2018 (Strickland, 2019). Therefore it is important to understand what social factors play a part in constructing the popularity of this phenomenon. Could community elements such as service quality and response to player feedback (Hamari, Hanner & Koivisto, 2017) play a part, or is it purely the entertainment value of the streamers that is driving this industrial change? These are a few of the social issues that could be answered through this research.

Free-to-play games have become more popular amongst gamers and non-gamers and as such they have begun marketing and promoting their online products on social media platforms such as Facebook or YouTube. On these platforms they will inevitably encounter young consumers. This raises ethical debates regarding advertising to children. The main debate surrounding this issue is whether or not the child is aware that they are being shown an advertisement and whether they have the advertising literacy needed to resist advertisements. In previous studies advertisement disclosure; which means stating that the content is an advertisement, lead to an increase in advertisement literacy that caused a decrease in purchase intention. Without advertising disclosure, factors such as influencer status caused an increase in purchase intention (Jans, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2019). This means that children are more likely to buy items if they are not aware they are being shown an advertisement, which is essentially what YouTube streamer videos are. It is not only direct advertisements that can affect children's advertising literacy but also passive influences from existing relationships such as parents and friends shape children's advertising literacy (Nairn & Fine, 2008).

Children, adolescents and adults who lack advertising literacy are not able to distinguish between a regular YouTube video and an Influencer marketing video. These types of consumers believe that in-game items provide a benefit to their play and will spend their parents' money on these items, in some cases even stealing their parents' credit card to purchase these in-game items (Smith, 2018). This topic may also shed light on perceived elements of YouTube videos that cause gamers to desire in-game items, as well as desiring

more play, possibly leading to game addiction and changes in their social behavior. Fortnite's (2017) popularity amongst the youth has caused a massive outcry from parents and in some cases has forced them to send their children to video game rehab (Nielsen & Kardefelt-Winther, 2018) in order to break their addiction. It is therefore socially relevant to study this topic as it is important to understand how gamers create these perceptions of value of in-game items and how external forces shape their perception. Excessive gaming has also been linked to desensitizing children to violence, decreasing their performance in school and reducing their ability to interact in face-to-face social interactions (Sax, 2019). As the game becomes more solidified into everyday life, it is imperative that an understanding of the nuanced ways gamers construct their perception of the game is reached so as to set proper guidelines in place for children under the age of 18 as well as for schools so they are better able to understand the root of the addiction and are better able to help students overcome it.

### **Academic relevance**

Influencer marketing and the study of free-to-play games have been at the center of academic scholars attention in recent years (Alha, Koskinen, Paavilainen, Hamari, & Kinnunen, 2014). With previous research focusing on the motivations for play in games and determinants of attractiveness for influencers (Hamari & Lehdonvirta, 2010; Chu & Kim, 2011; Boyle, Connolly, Hainey, & Boyle, 2012). This research will further expand on the knowledge of the perception of monetization elements as experienced by gamers through streamers. There is a lack of qualitative research exploring this phenomenon, but it is arguably one of the most important insights needed in order to understand how these in-game monetization elements shape user experience and how streamers shape the perception of these in-game monetization elements. Influencer marketing is closely linked to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) which has been extensively researched in marketing literature. Current literature explains that players purchase in-game items to build online identity, show status/prestige or when they have a sufficiently strong relationship with the game through continuous play (Marder, Gattig, Collins, Pitt, Kietzmann & Erz, 2019), as such the academic relevance stems from the fact it is important to understand how streamers endorsements are perceived, especially in the specific context of free-to-play games.

Previous studies examine how perceptions of game quality, in-game service, customer service and length of play influence the value ascribed to the game by users (Hsiao

& Chen, 2016). The amount of time spent playing increased perceived loyalty and thus encouraged in-game purchases. Other studies have found that purchasing in-game items relates to identity building in the online world (Marder, Gattig, Collins, Pitt, Kietzmann & Erz, 2019) or as a means of separating high-level and low-level players through prestige (Lin & Sun, 2007). Social influences have also been noted in previous studies, in social games where users have many friends, these friends may change the users attitude towards in-game items or items may be purchased to fit into the group or impress other friends in the game. This is also linked to game enjoyment in the sense that gamer attitude towards items can be influenced by their friends and the time spent playing, but also that the more time spent playing the more joy is derived from in-game items regardless of interactions with friends (Hamari, 2015). Other studies explore how game design in itself can motivate in-game purchases, factors such as responsiveness, customizability, reliability and assurance once determined by the user directly relate to purchase intention as well as play intention. It was also found that play intention in itself positively correlate to purchase intention of in-game items (Hamari, Hanner & Koivisto, 2017). It is therefore interesting to see, from a qualitative perspective, how gamers rationalize their motivations for purchasing in-game content compared to the insights from previous quantitative studies, as the impact of influencers was never fully explored.

The medium, in this case YouTube, is also relevant to study as it has over 1.8 Billion users a month (Gilbert, 2018) making it a pervasive media outlet that many gamers use to consume content, it is therefore practical to examine how the medium of YouTube in itself shapes gamer perceptions of streamer's gameplay. The content structure of Streamers YouTube videos is also highly varied, from competitive to casual gameplay, instructional versus purely entertainment, so users not only have a wide variety of content to choose from but also consume content to satisfy certain need such as to improve gameplay or for entertainment (Sjöblom, Törhönen, Hamari & Macey, 2017). The social aspect of the medium is important as well as users can engage in a games community, which simultaneously improves enjoyment of the game and can positively influence the user emotionally and cognitively (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). Finally the medium is important as it actively engages the user in the viewed content, which makes it easier for persuasive messages to reach users (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Previous studies in regards to influencer marketing relate to what makes an influencer an influencer such as the perceived trustworthiness, authenticity (Abidin & Ots,

2015) and follower count (Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017), and that in order to influence users, a streamer must have these qualities. Influencer marketing borrows many qualities from eWOM marketing, which has been extensively studied, in the way that content is more likely to be shared if it is humorous, relatable and easy to spread (Hsieh, Hsieh & Tang, 2012), but also that the relation to the influencer, the purpose of viewing the content and perceived credibility of the influencer directly impacted a consumer's willingness to engage in eWOM. Thus it is important to examine what elements influencers incorporate in their videos and how gamers perceive these elements, and how this builds up their perception of the game while simultaneously shaping their in-game experience. Previous studies have focused primarily on the determinants of eWOM behavior and the motivations for engaging in streamers videos and buying in-game items (Chu & Kim, 2011; Hamari, 2015; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017) but no study has thoroughly interviewed gamers to construct a thematic map of their perceptions.

## **Chapter Outline**

*Chapter 0. Introduction:* In the Introduction the topic of influencer marketing and free-to-play gaming are presented to the reader and a clear link is established between these two concepts. In the introduction the societal and academic relevance of this thesis is discussed. The research question guiding this research is “*How do FortNite gamers perceive in-game item’s endorsements in streamers’ YouTube videos?*” and is broken down into three sub questions being *How do gamers perceive streamers content; How are streamers perceived as source of inspiration or motivation to play; How do gamers perceive in-game products in streamer’s YouTube videos?*

## *Chapter 1. Theoretical Review*

In this section a review of theory pertaining to influencer marketing, free-to-play gaming was conducted. The latest trends in research are presented for both topics are presented and three theoretical concepts are outlined which are used to guide the data collection and analysis. Influencer marketing is discussed as a form of eWOM and research into the motivations for gamers to play and view other play is also discussed.

*Chapter 2. Methodology:* In this section the methods are explained and justified for this research. Thematic content analysis and in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect and analyze the data in order to find out how streamers influence gamers to purchase in-game items unknowingly.

*Chapter 3. Results & Discussion:* In this section the results of the 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews are discussed with 3 main selective codes with 3-4 axial codes each will be explained and discussed in relation to theory. A soft answering of the research question will be posed at the end of this section.

*Chapter 4. Conclusion:* In this section the results and discussion elements are summarized and critically compared to previous research conducted, the academic significance is discussed and the implications for future research as well as limitations of this research are discussed before finally answering the research question and concluding the research paper.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This research focuses on how gamers perceive product endorsements in streamers' YouTube videos. As such it is based in two very different theoretical worlds, one being free-to-play gaming and the other, influencer marketing. The focus on free-to-play gaming was a conscious choice based on the popularity of the genre in recent years as well as its enormous earning potential. Studies surrounding free-to-play gaming have been focused on the motivations to play such as relaxation or passing time, however there has been very little research on how the rising popularity of streamers has factored into these motivations.

The recent studies on influencer marketing have examined its use in business and have determined some basic guidelines on how to select influencers that suit a certain business, but very little research has been done on how influencers are perceived in the gaming community and how this may shape the perceptions of gamers. In order to investigate this phenomenon this chapter is broken down into two sections. In section 2.1 the theory surrounding free-to-play gaming is discussed. Three theoretical concepts are highlighted here, being achievement, enjoyment and identity building. In section 2.2 the theory surrounding influencer marketing is discussed through three main theoretical concepts being attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise. These concepts will be critically assessed alongside theories presented in section 2.1 to explain how in theory gamer's perceptions of product endorsements in streamers' YouTube videos are constructed.

### **2.1. Free-to-play gaming**

Free-to-play gaming refers to a specific form of gaming where the game can be acquired and played free of charge. While the game itself is free-to-play most free-to-play gaming companies encourage gamers to purchase virtual goods during play (Alha, Koskinen, Paavilainen, Hamari, & Kinnunen, 2014).

The rise of popularity of this form of gaming has spurred research into its specific effects on social behavior. Research has explored this phenomenon from a variety of perspectives, from how virtual world economies mimic real world patterns (Castronova, Williams, Shen, Ratan, Xiong, Huang, & Keegan, 2009), to the personal motivations and purchasing patterns players have for purchasing virtual goods (Wohn, 2014). A notable of research has also gone into the monetization of free-to-play gaming, with Lin & Sun (2007)

looking specifically at the challenges facing free-to-play games regarding monetization as they highlight the concept of the magic circle, in which game monetization elements need to be perceived as fair by players or they will not encourage spending.

Gamers can perceive virtual goods as items that improve play (Hamari & Lehdonvirta, 2010) or as symbols of status and achievement in the game which encourages players to either spend real world money on them or become proficient enough in the game to unlock them naturally (Hsiao & Chen, 2016). Moving further into this topic Hamari, Hanner & Koivisto (2017) explore how user experience and service quality encourage users to use freemium services but that they go premium because of commitment to the game and intention to play more to gain more rewards. So far it is clear that gamer perception can be influenced by game design and the socially constructed value surrounding virtual goods. In this research specific focus was given to the main concepts relating to how in-game items shape a gamers perception of achievement and enjoyment of the game as well as how these items shape gamer perceptions of their own online identity.

### *Achievement*

Achievement is a notable feeling that gamers have when certain conditions in the game have been met (Boyle, Connolly, Hainey & Boyle, 2012), for example, completing challenges or unlocking new items for a character. Feeling a sense of achievement may encourage gamers to spend more time playing a game as explored in a literature review of 50 papers by Boyle, Connolly, Hainey & Boyle (2012) on engagement in video games. The results of the paper highlight that feelings of achievement, enjoyment and to pass time were some of the main motivators to play games, which, of course, varies per game type as some games provide higher social benefits whereas others offer more in-depth levels of escapism and relaxation.

The notion of deep game worlds has also been thoroughly explored and it is shown that gamers are more likely to spend more time gaming if game worlds are deep and provide incentives for progressing in the game such as access to new in-game items, or status (Oh & Ryu, 2007). It is clear that game design influences the perception of gamers, as well as their actions outside the game, so much so that a desire for greater success in a game may encourage gamers to seek information on how to improve in the game from external sources.

Guo and Barnes (2009) set the precedent for this line of thinking in their qualitative study into the purchasing behaviors of gamers in virtual worlds. In their study they highlight

self-actualization as the outcome of purchasing virtual goods but that this is influenced by a variety of factors such as game world depth, peers and real world assets. A more detailed game world is more likely to encourage users to purchase in-game items as they improve experience. It is important to note that if there is no perceived usefulness of the item there will be no purchase intention, but perceived usefulness is subjective and differs depending on the level of gamer. The more time invested in a game the more likely that there is a high-perceived usefulness of items that are seen to fulfill the player needs.

Cha (2011) reaffirms this line of thinking in their quantitative study, which examined the factors and consumer characteristics that influence purchase intentions of virtual goods. It was found that perceived usefulness, ease of use, enjoyment, security and privacy concerns influence intention to purchase virtual items and that gender had a moderating role on these effects. They posit that males with high-perceived usefulness, ease of use and enjoyment are more likely to purchase virtual goods than females with similar perceptions. The perceived usefulness in this case can be interpreted as useful to improve the user experience thus linking usefulness and achievement, in the sense that the more useful the virtual good the more likely a user is to feel that the item helps them achieve more in the virtual world. As mentioned previously in order to improve in the game and seek higher forms of achievement gamers may watch higher-level gamers in streams or on YouTube.

In a study by Glas (2015) it is highlighted that there is rise in-gamer streaming and that the streamer is both the subject and playing the subject at the same time. They note that one of the uses of watching others play games is to improve one's own gameplay by learning the desired behaviors from the streamer. This is how gamers utilize streamer videos to reach their goals and develop their sense of achievement.

### *Enjoyment*

Enjoyment is considered to be one of the main motivations gamers have for playing games, and can be described as the feeling of satisfaction or fun when playing (Park & Lee, 2011). Wu and Liu (2007) conducted a quantitative study using an augmented theory of reasoned action model with new additions of trust and enjoyment in order to see their impact on intentions to play online video games. Trust was seen to have an indirect effect on intention to play as it only influenced attitude towards the game, which then influenced the intention to play. Enjoyment was seen to have a direct impact intention to play. Other studies confirm

that the higher the play intention, the longer the play, the more likely a user is to purchase in-game items as means of enjoying the game more.

Hsiao and Chen (2016) found that the longer a player is with a game the higher the intentions of in-app purchasing becomes through loyalty, other influences such as perceived utility of an in-app purchase were also found to be significant in purchase decision making. In essence we see interplay between trust and enjoyment within purchase intention for virtual goods. Hamari (2015) and Lehdonvirta (2009) echo this notion by stating that higher enjoyment leads to greater amounts of play and thus higher levels of purchase intentions over time, but that enjoyment in the short run does not necessarily cause purchase intention of in-game items.

Game design can also influence purchase intention as the study by Kim (2014) highlights. In ethnographic study game structure is seen as a guiding force in user experience, and the example of *Animal Crossing* (2001) was used to illustrate that players emphasized the values the game creators put into the game i.e. good work ethic. Specifically they posit that interactivity within the game leads to deeper narratives that engross the player and are seen to create enjoyment for the game. This has been echoed by other studies (Hamari & Lehdonvirta, 2010; Oh & Ryu, 2007), which strengthens the case for gamer's perceptions being shaped by those who showcase these game mechanics, such as streamers. Gamers consume streamer's videos for fun but also for learning, and thus can be informed of certain game mechanics through this medium.

In their quantitative study Park and Lee (2011) created a new construct based of the theory of consumption values that highlight enjoyment, character competency, visual authority and monetary values as statistically significant predictors of user intention to purchase game items. Their value of enjoyment was composed of three variables being fun, perceived enjoyment and playfulness value. If the game is perceived as fun, gives the player enjoyment, and has a high perception of playfulness then users are more likely to purchase in-game items as the purchase is justified, without justification there is no purchase intention. Cha (2011) reaffirms this line of thinking in their quantitative study mentioned previously which examined the factors and consumer characteristics that influence purchase intentions of virtual goods. It was found that perceived enjoyment was strongly linked to purchase intentions of virtual goods so the more perceived enjoyment a user derives from a virtual item the more likely they are to purchase it.

## *Identity Building*

Identity building in this research refers to the ways in which gamers construct their online identity in a game. As previously mentioned motivations for play may be to achieve something, derive pleasure from or escape one's own reality. Even in a different reality such as the game world, there is evidence to suggest that gamers still desire to express themselves in a personal way by customizing their avatars (in-game representation of player).

In a qualitative study using interviews Marder, Gattig, Collins, Pitt, Kietzmann and Erz (2019) found that in-game items are usually purchased as a means of conveying online identity in free-to-play games. They found that items could be used to keep the game novel and interesting, for aesthetics, self-gratification, character dedication, reciprocity and visual authority and social distinction. Essentially the stronger the emotions of the gamer towards the game the more likely they are to engage in identity building activities in order to satisfy their needs such as the need to set oneself aside from others in-game. Park and Lee (2011) echoed and also noted that visual authority and character competency were motivating factors for in-game item purchases. These factors are subjective, as each player constructs their own identity and thus values virtual goods differently.

However it is interesting to note what other factors shape this perception, such as external references by peers or game design (Hamari & Lehdonvirta, 2010) or streamers Dux (2018). Guo and Barnes (2009) note that deep game worlds, social influence, real world assets, trust, character competency and perceived playfulness factor into purchase intentions. Character competency here drives gamers to purchase virtual items as a means of achievement and also a means of distinguishing oneself from other gamers, which builds on the notion of visual authority. Perceived playfulness refers to the depth of the game and the enjoyment players get from gameplay, higher levels of perceived playfulness mean higher purchase intentions, however the more enjoyment and time invested in a game, the higher the likelihood of purchasing virtual in-game items.

It is clear that the game mechanics and gamer predisposition to the game shape gamer perceptions regarding their achievement, enjoyment and identity building in a game. However there is a rising trend of game streaming and competitive gaming in the form of Esports. As gamers spend more time gaming, their desire to improve leads them to seek information from professionals, in this case, game streamers. As such the next section

discusses various theories associated with influencer marketing and how this shapes users' perception of a product. The influencers in this research will be referred to as streamers and the product is the free-to-play game FortNite.

## **2.2. Influencer Marketing**

Influencer marketing is the use of “key leaders to drive a brand’s message to a larger market” (Byrne, Kearney, & Macevilly, 2017, p.1) and has often been compared to word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) forms of marketing in terms of what drives it and how it can be managed. As such, much of the theory presented in this section borrows from eWOM literature. The notion of influencers as a research topic has been widely explored with early quantitative research by Goldsmith and Clark (2008) showing strong positive effects for purchase intentions due to opinion leaders in comparison to traditional advertising techniques. Lin, Bruning, and Swarna (2018) build on this notion by stating that influencers build experiential as well as functional value for the products they endorse, and created a framework for selecting the best influencers. In their framework they emphasize the need to strategically plan the use of influencers and that the content type should fit in with the role the influencer has determined for themselves as discrepancies in influencer content may lead to a lack of trustworthiness by their followers and a negative brand association for the company.

In their quantitative study Booth and Matic (2011) propose a different framework in which to discover influencers as well as present ways in which these influencers shape traditional audiences. In their framework, there are nine variables that influencers can be judged on such as their social aggregator rate, the amount of participation they have on social media, engagement rate, the amount of comments and shares on their posts, and post frequency. They note that influencers are important to business as they provide a more authentic means for customers to engage with the company brand.

In most cases influencers rely on their content as their means of life, as such they rely heavily on producing viral content. The nature of virality is important for this study as both content producers and content consumers follow these elements, in the sense that consumers look for relatable content to share and producers seek to create relatable content to be shared. The SPIN framework by Mills (2012) shows that for content to be viral and thus influential it must be easy to spread to networks, must have relevance and entertainment value to consumers and must be integrated into social networks. In essence influencers in the free-to-play game sphere are referred to as streamers, and streamers are seen as a source of information and entertainment by gamers. As such the following sections will relate the

concepts within influencer marketing to gamers and this forms the theoretical backbone for this research.

### *Attractiveness*

For this research attractiveness in influencer marketing refers to how relatable the content is to the user. In their quantitative study Chu and Kim, (2011) found that past literature had found 5 determinants for spreading information via eWOM being tie strength, homophily (more likely to share information with people of similar nature to you), trust, normative influence and informational influence. Tie strength, trust and informational influence had strong effects on consumers eWOM behavior, in the context of attractiveness this means that content from close friends or trusted sources that provide important and or actionable information are seen as the most attractive by users. In the case of gaming, the greater the tie strength and relatability the more likely a gamer is to view a streamers content, they primarily view streamer videos to improve upon their own game play and are thus looking for streamers that are similar to them in that sense (Chu & Kim, 2011).

Hsieh, Hsieh, and Tang, (2012) proposed that eWOM behaviors or the propensity to forward content is determined by three factors being awareness of persuasive intent, perceived humor and the multimedia effect. They highlight that persuasive intent is negatively associated with eWOM, as a user is less likely to share something they perceive to be an advertisement. However humor and the multimedia effect (the richness of media content) were seen to positively influence attitudes towards shared content and had a higher likelihood of getting a user to share this content. This reinforces the statement that the more relatable the content the more appealing it is and thus the more attractive it is.

Pornpitakpan (2004) conducted a literature review on source credibility literature over the last 50 years and proposed that in general high source credibility is associated with higher levels of persuasion, and that source credibility can be evaluated along 3 main dimensions being credibility, attractiveness and power. Physical attractiveness was seen to have minor effect on source credibility which was echoed by Tews, Stafford, and Zhu (2009) who note that personality and ability are factors that influence the desirability of listening to someone, where similar personalities between the viewer and streamer lead to greater enjoyment of their content. It is clear that the more enjoyment a gamer gets from

consuming a streamers content, the more often they will consume their content and the more they trust what the streamer is saying.

Nascimento, Ribeiro, Cerf, Cesario, Kaytoue, Raissi, Vasconcelos and Meira (2014) created a model that characterizes user behavior on streaming platforms like Twitch. They found that high-level gameplay as well as socialization factors played an important role in the viewing behavior of gamers. High-level gameplay satisfies both the need for entertainment and the need to improve one's own level of play while engaging oneself with a games community. Sjöblom, Törhönen, Hamari, and Macey (2017) build on this view and list three dimensions which users follow when viewing online streams. They propose that tensions release, information seeking and social/ personal integration are factors that influence a users propensity to stream. Tension release refers to the entertainment value of the stream as a means of relieving stress, information seeking refers to the users desire to improve their gameplay and social/personal integration refers to the sense of community one gets from engaging in a streamers video and relating it to their own experience with the game. Sjöblom and Hamari (2017) add an emotional dimension to this model in the sense that users seek to get emotional satisfaction from streams through entertainment value from high-level visually pleasing gameplay. Emotional satisfaction such as the feeling of fun and enjoyment therefore encourages gamers to watch streamers for entertainment purposes.

### *Trustworthiness*

It is clear that a gamer's perception can be influenced by game design, and the streamer based on how attractive a streamers content is to watch. However trustworthiness is also considered to be a determinant for users to view an influencer's content. As previously stated Pornpitakpan (2004) conducted a literature review on source credibility literature over the last 50 years and proposed that in general high source credibility is associated with higher levels of persuasion, source credibility can be evaluated along 3 main dimensions being credibility, attractiveness and power. Credibility here represents trustworthiness and it is clear that the content shown, and the influencer's expertise in an area improves source credibility and therefore trustworthiness.

A study by Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) followed the characteristics of Instagram influencers and found that perceived popularity encourages trustworthiness which touches on the notion of reputation. In this case a positive reputation may encourage new

users to trust the influencer faster than if they were not popular. In the gaming world the more popular a streamer is, then the more likely a gamer is to view and believe their content. This notion builds on earlier research by Chu and Kim who stated that “tie strength, trust, normative and informational influence are positively associated with users’ overall eWOM behavior” (2011, p.68). Essentially gamers would be more likely to trust a streamer if there is perceived similarities between the gamer and streamer, and this will likely lead to the gamer consuming more of this content as well as sharing it in their network. In their online article Perry (2012) stated that it is imperative for influencers to be upfront about their endorsements, and that disclosing sponsored posts leads to higher credibility and trustworthiness from their audience. This is closely linked to expertise as bloggers should only accept items or create posts for brands that fit into their pre existing niche market, if a shoe blogger starts posting about sponsored yoghurt they are likely to lose followers and credibility.

Disclosing sponsored content is one way of clearly communicating user expectations by the streamer, however no matter the disclosure, if there is a perceived lack of relevance between the content and streamer then users will lose faith in the streamer. Greenheck, Johnson, Graves and Oak (2018) state that in order for messages to be perceived positively special attention should be given to ensure that the message content and influencer values align in order to ensure authenticity and trustworthiness in the audiences. They highlight that in this regard micro influencers are perceived to be more authentic and trustworthy, especially when dealing with socially hot topics like the meat industry. Applying this line of thinking to this research echoes previous studies in the sense that message content, relationship to the influencer and the size of the influencer impact the trustworthiness users ascribe to this influencer.

Abidin and Ots (2015) reaffirm this notion of trustworthiness with their study into the industry of influencer marketing and the lack of procedures shaping the industry. The study states that influencers are brands in themselves and thus have to maintain their authenticity and credibility to remain relevant to their audience. They highlight that when scandals occur where the influencer is found to be lying in their posts a loss in credibility and followers was noted, therefore it is in an influencer’s best interest to manage their content professionally and ensure there is no discrepancy in the content and influencer values.

Wu (2016) echoes previous statements regarding disclosure of advertisements and credibility, in their study that focused on the legal aspects of advertising on YouTube. They state that while disclosure may hurt advertising impact in the short run, in the long run it improves credibility and trustworthiness in the source and can thus be leveraged in the future. It is explicitly mentioned that influencers need to maintain a clear line between their content and their own personal values in order to ensure credibility. When looking into persuasive communication and social cognitive theory by Bandura (2009), Breckler and Wiggins (1991) found that preconceived attitudes towards issues or stimuli had a large effect on the cognition of the communication message. It is therefore important to consider this when answering how gamer's perceptions on in-game product endorsements are formed.

Trustworthiness for this research will therefore refer to how credible a user perceives an influencer to be, as well as what attitudes they have towards the influencer. It would be logical to assume that the more trusted the source the more likely a gamer is to believe their message regarding product endorsements. Gamers are drawn to streamers for entertainment and cognitive stimulus, as such the more they trust a streamer the more of this content they will consume and believe in regards to in-game product endorsements.

### *Expertise*

One of the last theoretical constructs found to have an impact on content views of influencers was that of expertise. Expertise was found to be a positive influence on source credibility in the study conducted by Pornpitakpan (2004), which highlights that perceived expertise in celebrities leads to positive attitudes towards the endorser and advertised good or service. In this sense expertise is linked to credibility but is also a completely separate dimension by which users evaluate influencers. In the context of FortNite streamers expertise would be evaluated by their win loss ratio, number of subscribers and number of videos posted for example as well as their in-game strategies, movement and general knowledge of game mechanics.

Lin, Bruning, and Swarna (2018) echo the importance of expertise in their study which provides a framework for corporations to use when engaging in influencer marketing. In this framework a five step plan is produced which entails planning, recognition, alignment, motivation and coordination. In their study expertise is the fit of the influencer to the type of content they are promoting, which again is closely linked to concepts of

credibility and trustworthiness. If the influencer is relevant to the product, properly motivated and aligned with the product the likelihood of a successful campaign is much higher. In a sense it is the perception of expertise and alignment of influencer values with the corporation's values that allow for believable and successful influencer marketing strategies to be used. In the case of streamers this would mean staying true to showing parts of the game that are relevant for them, as their expertise in these game modes may be so distinct it might draw in-gamers with similar tastes.

Perry (2012) and Wu (2016) explain that expertise can be shown through appropriate disclosure of advertising intent and sponsored content. They posit that disclosure improves credibility and that higher source credibility is usually associated with higher perceptions of expertise. It is logical to assume that if professional measures are taken by the influencer to ensure the user is aware of branded content, the perceptions of expertise of the influencer will rise as well as positive attitudes towards the endorser and endorsed product. For this research the concept of expertise refers to how much value users ascribe to a certain influencer about a certain topic, in this case FortNite. More knowledge displayed about FortNite in videos leads to higher levels of perceived expertise, which is also shown through exceptional gameplay.

In this section the concepts of achievement, enjoyment and identity building explain the motivations gamers have for playing a video game and why they may purchase in-game virtual items, even in the case of free-to-play games. The concepts of attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise explain what makes gamers choose certain streamers content to follow and why they might believe such content over others. In the next chapter the methodology will be presented for this study.

### **3. Methodology**

In this section the methodological process for this research will be discussed. In section 3.1 the research design is explained and the decision for choosing in-depth semi-structured interviews is justified. In section 3.2 the sampling method is explained and justified and the list of participants is provided. Section 3.3 discusses the process used for data collection and analysis. In section 3.4 the operationalization of the theoretical concepts is discussed and some example questions are shown. In section 3.5 the issues with credibility and validity for this research are discussed.

#### ***3.1. Research Design***

In order to answer the question “How do FortNite gamers perceive in-game purchase endorsements in streamers’ YouTube videos?” it was necessary to conduct a qualitative study, as the question deals with human experience and is therefore impossible to answer with surveys responses as they are too narrow (Brennen, 2012). With this qualitative research multiple avenues for more specific future research were determined, therefore, as this topic is exploratory in nature the focus was on achieving data saturation. Which took precedence over determining a causal result, as more information was needed to reduce erroneous variables. Finally examining the perceptions of endorsements in videos is context specific, thus using qualitative methods provided greater academic relevance than a quantitative study would on this topic. Interviews were chosen over focus groups as they allow for greater descriptions by the interviewee which were reaffirmed or contrasted with other interview transcripts whereas focus groups may have hindered data collection as participants could not go into too much depth due to time constraints or personal circumstance.

Interviews also allowed for greater comparisons of interviewees, as they were compared with one another, on the group level as determined by demographics, as well as within case comparisons to uncover how individuals construct values in relation to their understanding of product endorsements. Comparing interviewee definitions helped produce thick descriptions and understandings of the phenomena in question while still allowing for different avenues of interpretation to take place. As such in-depth semi-structured interviews

are better suited than focus groups at uncovering the deeper meaning behind these perceptions as opposed to a quantitative study. Quantitative studies are better suited to uncovering causal relationships and involve testing pre determined theories, whereas qualitative research methods are based in interpretivist and constructivist sciences allowing for more experiential and targeted understanding (Sale, JLohfeld, & Brazil, 2002). This research uncovered how specific group of gamers perceive product endorsements in their favorite streamers YouTube videos.

Therefore in-depth semi-structured interviews were chosen to give more flexibility (Brennen, 2012) to explore new insights as they appeared in the interview process as the aim of the research was to uncover how gamers perceive in-game item endorsements in streamer's videos, therefore it is more beneficial to use a flexible research design to adapt questions and interviewees as needed to explore the desired phenomena (Flick, 2007). This follows a neo-positivist conception of an interview which focuses on ensuring that the researcher maintains quality by the interview process is transparent and able to be evaluated for bias (Roulston, 2010). This approach places emphasis on truth and accuracy and suits the nature of trying to understand the perceptions of consumers and their motivations towards in-game items and the streamers they watch.

### ***3.2 Sampling***

Interviewees were sourced using a mix of purposeful, snowball and convenience sampling (Flick, 2007). Purposeful sampling was used because the participants of the research were required to be regular FortNite gamers, and regular consumers of streamer's YouTube videos. If one of the requirements were not met, the participant would be unable to provide the necessary understanding of the phenomena. Purposive sampling compliments the accessibility, time efficiency and cost of convenience sampling with controlled participant criteria and allows for greater data saturation to occur. The specificity of the research question requires participants who exhibit certain behaviors such as watching a certain amount of streamer videos on YouTube and playing a certain amount of FortNite. Therefore it made the most logical sense to choose and pick participants with the desired knowledge as opposed to randomly selecting a sample frame from the general population. The main issues associated with this sampling technique are the tendency towards bias and the problem of

outliers (Etikan, 2016). Convenience samples are typically smaller than other samples gained from alternative techniques and due to the nature of non-probability sampling they do not statistically correct for the impact of outliers. In this case an outlier would be a participant who does not completely fit the requirements of the study by either not playing FortNite regularly or not watching FortNite streamers. These kinds of outliers can influence results and if not filtered out can undermine the entire research. In order to avoid these issues with convenience sample I used my own personal network as a fellow FortNite player to source willing participants for this study and ensure that the sample was homogeneous by mimicking the characteristics of the actual FortNite player base. Snowball sampling was used here to reach even more participants, as the personal network of the researcher and convenience sampling techniques proved not able to fully satisfy the sample size.

Conducting these forms of non-probability sampling is more successful using social media due to the disclosure of information by the researcher, as participants can view the researchers profile and can confirm their background as a researcher and the authenticity of the research (Baltar & Brunet, 2012), however this raised some ethical considerations regarding participants and the references to their behavior, one issue involves intimate perspectives or recollections of behavior that they attribute to other friends who will participate in the research. By using this intimate data for the other respondent it may violate trust amongst participants (Brewis, 2014). This may also skew the research by influencing the respondent's answers to coincide with what the other participants stated previously. In order to ensure there was equal number of female and male participants female specific gaming groups were contact through Facebook with no response. Due to this all participants in this research were male. However the player base of FortNite is 72% male (Statista, 2018, May), so this makes it interesting to pay more attention to male players in this specific context.

A sample table with specific information on the participants is provided in Figure 3.1. In general, the age range for this sample in this research was 21-25 years due to the recent popularity of FortNite and its player demographics, which 67% of players are between the ages of 18-24 (Statista, 2018). As such it was impractical to source interviewees above the age of 26 as we are interested in invested players who are more likely to have purchased in-game content and view YouTube streams by FortNite players. There were no restrictions on nationality as FortNite is distributed globally and has a player base in most countries. Most nationalities represented were European, and 7 out of 12 of the participants

were students in their Master, PHD or Bachelor program. Participants were asked whom their favorite streamer was, which was later found to be linked to the amount of time they spent playing and their level of commitment to the game. Where more committed players would watch more objectively serious streamers such as Tfue, a multi-time FortNite world champion. And less committed players would watch more comedic streamers such as LazerBeam or Dr. Disrespect. The most frequent streamer noted was SypherPK known primarily for his educational strategic videos on FortNite game mechanics and Tfue known primarily for being the top FortNite gamer and professional player. Nickmercs was the third most mentioned streamer due to his comedic emphasis in his FortNite YouTube videos, as such participants would mainly consume his content for entertainment purposes.

The videos used during the interviews, shown in the table below, featured the participant's favorite streamer showing elements of expertise. This was defined as displaying high-level gameplay as well as explaining how to mimic this gameplay for players. Videos with these elements were chosen to guide the discussion around the expertise of the streamer and specifically why participants considered them to be an expert. This also allowed for more insight into how participants define what is an expert in FortNite to them and how much they use this expertise in trying to improve their own gameplay. Due to time constraints the entire video was not shown, which is why a time segment for each video is provided in the table. The time segments were generally two minutes long so as not to lose the attention of the participant and not take up too much time in the interview process. If participants liked the same streamer then the same video and segment were used to allow for more comparable responses.

| Participant | Age | Occupation | Nationality     | Favorite Streamer | Video Used  | Time segment |
|-------------|-----|------------|-----------------|-------------------|---|--------------|
| Rodrigo     | 23  | Working    | Spanish         | Sypherpk          | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixwBaaey40A">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixwBaaey40A</a> | 0:00-2:00    |
| Max         | 24  | Working    | Dutch/Taiwanese | Tsm Hamlinz       | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixwBaaey40A">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixwBaaey40A</a> | 0:00-2:00    |

|        |    |             |                |              |   |           |
|--------|----|-------------|----------------|--------------|---|-----------|
|        |    |             |                |              | ch?v=PCMHuSa8biM  |           |
| Andre  | 24 | PHD student | Brazilian      | Nickmercs    | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwDMfkyMuQY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwDMfkyMuQY</a> | 0:21-2:30 |
| Mati   | 24 | Working     | Polish         | SypherPK     | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixwBaaey40A">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixwBaaey40A</a> | 0:00-2:00 |
| Camiel | 21 | Student     | Dutch          | DrDisrespect | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brhraAPm0_Q">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brhraAPm0_Q</a> | 1:10-3:00 |
| Andrei | 25 | Working     | Albanian/Dutch | SypherPK     | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixwBaaey40A">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixwBaaey40A</a> | 0:00-2:00 |
| Maxim  | 22 | Student     | Russian/Dutch  | Nickmercs    | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwDMfkyMuQY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwDMfkyMuQY</a> | 0:21-2:30 |
| Bartek | 21 | Student     | Polish         | SypherPK     | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixwBaaey40A">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixwBaaey40A</a> | 0:00-2:00 |
| Wisse  | 22 | Student     | NL             | Tfue         | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixwBaaey40A">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixwBaaey40A</a> | 4:10-6:10 |

|        |    |         |                 |      |   |               |
|--------|----|---------|-----------------|------|---|---------------|
|        |    |         |                 |      | ch?v=X2_4iU<br>X7LS0  |               |
| Dennis | 23 | Student | NL              | Tfue | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2_4iUX7LS0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2_4iUX7LS0</a> | 4:10-<br>6:10 |
| Pete   | 23 | Working | USA             | Tfue | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2_4iUX7LS0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2_4iUX7LS0</a> | 4:10-<br>6:10 |
| Kojo   | 24 | Student | South<br>Africa | Tfue | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2_4iUX7LS0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2_4iUX7LS0</a> | 4:10-<br>6:10 |

*Figure 3.1: Participant Information table*

### **3.3: Data collection and analysis**

For this research data collection was conducted using in-depth semi-structured interviews, this data was then analyzed using thematic content analysis. Twelve semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 minutes were conducted from April 1st -May 31st 2019. One participant opted for a face-to-face interview while the rest opted for online interviews. Eight interviews were conducted via Skype and two using Discord, a communication platform designed for gamers. All interviews were conducted in English and all participants were required to consent to this research by listening to the research goals and their role in the research. Informed consent was provided before the interviews began. The interviews were first conducted and recorded, then transcribed verbatim using Temi, a transcription service tool. The transcriptions of each interview were uploaded into Atlas.ti for the process of coding; a code tree is available in Appendix B.

Due to some participants living in other cities and countries they were unable to make regular face-to-face interviews, therefore video conferencing software such as Skype

was used. Skype interviewing allows for a greater range when choosing one's sample, as respondents are no longer bound by geographical limits. As this research focuses on a global phenomena, the use of Skype interviewing allows for a more homogeneous convenience sample to be produced (Iacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016) where homogeneous refers to the age, time spent playing FortNite and time spent watching FortNite streamers on YouTube. In some cases rapport was seen to be built quicker in Skype interviews and it has been noted that the ability to observe non verbal communication cues is as authentic in Skype interviews as they are in face to face interviews (Janghorban, Roudsari & Taghipour, 2014). Skype interviewing is also cheaper and requires less physical resources to conduct however, in the same way it opens up the research to new participants it blocks those without access to Internet from participating. However since FortNite is an online game, Internet access was also considered to be a factor needed by participants in this research. As such it was important to bare these limitations in mind.

For this thesis project thematic content analysis was be used to analyze the in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews. Thematic analysis was chosen for this project because it emphasizes the “context of the material being analyzed and allows for both an inductive and deductive form of analysis” (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013, p.399) meaning that themes can be found based on previous literature as well as be formed from the current study allowing for greater flexibility in the analysis. This method can also be applied easily to interview transcripts as it does not rely on analysis communication strictly through a singular theory but allows for rich thick descriptions of data to be created across the data types. Thematic content analysis is more descriptive as it provides a nuanced qualitative review of the phenomenon. Themes are also constructed progressively throughout the analytic process; as such codes can be changed, improved or removed as new insights shape the observed themes (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011). The goal of thematic content analysis is not to derive theory but instead “describe and understand how people feel, think and behave within a particular context relative to the proposed research question” (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011, p.7).

A systematic process of thematic content analysis was used to analyze the transcripts of the 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews. First, during transcription of the interviews preliminary ideas for codes were noted for future use. Secondly the initial codes were created, interesting features of data were systematically coded across the data set in an exhaustive manner in order to reach data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2006 as cited in

Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). Coding was primarily theory driven, so the third step, searching for themes (selective codes) and sub themes (axial codes) was more structured than the previous level of open coding. The data in this stage revealed 3 overarching themes or selective codes with 3-4 sub themes or axial codes per theme. The themes created were exhaustive and contained all open codes created.

The next step was reviewing the themes to ensure that they work in relation to coded extracts and the data set (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013); from this process a thematic map was produced and available in the Appendix. The next stage would be to define and name the themes, as the themes will be refined to see the story the analysis is trying to tell. Finally the report concerning the themes in relation to the research question was produced and discussed in the results and discussion section, and through rigorous processing and systematic analysis this research was conducted reliably and is confident in its findings (Silverman, 2015).

### ***3.4: Operationalization***

The interview questions were created following a narrative style in order to allow interviewees to freely describe their experience with FortNite and FortNite streamers. The interview was divided into eight sections (see the Interview Guide in Appendix A), starting with the introduction section where the research is explained, consent is given and the interview structure is explained to the interviewee. The next six sections were each relating to a different aspect of theory pertaining to the research and are explained in further detail below. The final section is the closing section where the interviewee can ask any questions and provide any final thoughts relating to the topics discussed in the interview. The questions were created to be open ended and avoid interrogative and double negative questions that lead participants toward a certain desired response (Heritage, 2002). A table containing the questions and relation to concept is available as an appendix.

The first 3 sections relate to the concepts of attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise and accessed the interviewee's opinion of their favorite streamer. The concepts of attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise all help explain how the relationship between the user and streamer is formed, and this relationship influences how credible and thus believable a streamer is to a user. The concept of attractiveness is important as a higher opinion of the streamer and content makes viewers more likely to accept persuasive messages and product endorsements. This was operationalized by asking the respondent about what makes them watch a certain streamer with examples being personality or content as these were noted in theory as being determinants on attractiveness (Chu & Kim, 2011; Nascimento et al, 2014; Sjöblom, Törhönen, Hamari, & Macey, 2017). The concept of trustworthiness explains that the more trust a user has for a streamer or influencer the more likely they are to believe the information they provide them with, for example in regards to in-game product endorsements (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Perry, 2012; Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Greenheck, Johnson, Graves & Oak, 2018). This was operationalized by asking how participants construct their trust of the streamer as well as what it takes for this trust to be broken. The concept of expertise refers to high-level gameplay that streamers use to differentiate themselves from other streamers and draw in followers who watch this type of content for entertainment purposes but also to improve their own gameplay (Perry, 2012; Wu, 2016; Lin, Bruning, & Swarna, 2018). As this concept is closely linked with entertainment, clips of video of the interviewee's favorite streamer were used to show

concrete examples of “expertise” and then assess the interviewee’s opinion of the clip and streamer. The last three sections relate to the concepts of achievement, enjoyment and identity building. These concepts sought to uncover the interviewee’s own motivations for play and how in-game products play into these motivations.

The concept of achievement was aimed at uncovering the gamer’s behavior regarding in-game items and what impact they believe they had on their gameplay as well as feelings towards the game. It is important because some gamers purchase these items thinking they will improve gameplay or show status (Guo & Barnes, 2009; Cha, 2011; Boyle, Connolly, Hainey & Boyle, 2012). Questions asked in this section began with how does FortNite make you feel and why do they played it, progressing into how in-game elements like challenges or new game modes shape their perception. Focus is given to how in-game items shape the gamers perception of achievement and whether this enacts a perceived change in their gameplay. The concept of enjoyment highlights the motivations behind purchasing in-game content. Theory states that enjoyment is one of the key reasons for consuming streamer’s YouTube content and purchasing in-game items as they may subconsciously encourage more play by creating positive emotions in the gamer that they wish to reenact in-games of their own (Wu & Liu, 2007; Hamari, 2015; Hsiao & Chen, 2016). This section began by asking the participant to recall a video of a FortNite streamer that they enjoyed, and to describe what was happening in that video and whether they noticed these elements in games of their own that they enjoyed. The final concept of identity building was noted as another key reason for in-game purchases as in-game items form a hierarchical function of showing status that differentiates gamers online, as such it is important to understand how online identity and in-game items are linked (Guo & Barnes, 2009; Park & Lee, 2011; Marder, Gattig, Collins, Pitt, Kietzmann & Erz, 2019). This section focused on the participants consumption of in-game content such as skins, specifically why they purchased them and how these items make them feel. Skins in this research refer to outfits for a player’s avatar. They are primarily obtained from the FortNite battle-pass or purchased directly from the Epic Games store.

The final section was for participants to ask any questions, raise any issues and finally provide any last minute additions to the interview regarding how streamer’s shaped their perception of FortNite (2017).

### ***3.5 Validity & Credibility***

Qualitative rigor or credibility/reliability can be defined as the ways to establish trust in the findings of the research and that they are consistent if the research is to be conducted again with a different sample (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). There are two kinds of validity relevant to this research being external and internal validity. “Internal credibility can be defined as the truth value, applicability, consistency, neutrality, dependability, and/or credibility of interpretations and conclusions within the underlying setting or group” whereas “external credibility refers to the degree that the findings of a study can be generalized across different populations of persons, settings, contexts, and times” (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006, p.234-235). There are multiple approaches to ensuring validity and credibility in research; in this case elements that ensure transactional validity were used. Transactional validity “assumes that qualitative research can be more credible as long as certain techniques, methods, and/or strategies are employed during the conduct of the inquiry” (Cho & Trent, 2006, p.322). This section will critically assess the stages of the research design, data collection and data analysis in relation to threats to internal and external validity.

The main issues that were likely to present a challenge to both the internal and external validity and credibility of the research are researcher bias and sampling bias. Researcher bias occurs due to the closeness of the researcher to the topic of research (Bolderston, 2012) and can be incurred subconsciously through responses to the interviewee as well as non-verbal communication. In some interviews it was clear that the personal relationship with the participants created a more informal setting which on one hand allowed for a more relaxed participant producing more honest answers while on the other it may encourage participants to go along with the research to help a friend. This creates a threat to internal validity as the results may differ with different participants (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006). The transactional method used to counteract this was member checking, where the researcher repeated certain statements made by the participant to ensure they are correct as well as probe for further meaning. This improves the integrity of the research as the participants play a larger role in ensuring that what they intended to say is being said, creating less ambiguity and more true form of interpretation by the researcher (Cho & Trent, 2006).

Another form of research-based bias that concerns this research is confirmation bias, which is only selecting data that confirms the research question (Roulston & Shelton, 2015).

This form of bias usually occurs in the data analysis stage of the research. In this case the closeness of the research topic to the researcher may encourage confirmation bias, to avoid this strict transcripts and a quotation system was employed to backup any assumptions or claims made in the results section. However rigorous the method of data gathering a researcher may still encounter issues in creating codes due to the variety of responses to the questions, as such key insights may be missed due to improper coding (Turner, 2010), To avoid this each interview was assessed promptly after they were completed to mitigate confirmation bias. This form of bias is a threat to internal validity as it does not show the true perception of the phenomenon and thus will not yield the same results if conducted again with a different sample. The codes produced and insights gained from the research follow results from similar studies which shows that it is theoretically sound and the interpretations of the data are correct and do not pose a threat to internal validity.

Threats to external validity/credibility present themselves in the sampling selection stage of this research. The sample demographics for this research were solely males, which means that it is not fully generalizable to larger populations. However the goal of qualitative research is to uncover specific phenomenon and how they are perceived in a specific context. As such the sample collected for this research addresses the majority of FortNite (2017) gamers and therefore insights from this research are still interesting for researchers in this field.

## 4. Results & Discussion

The in-depth qualitative interviews produced four distinctly unique selective codes generated from 94 open codes. This chapter explains the themes, their relation to theory and discusses the practical implication for the research question “How do FortNite gamers perceive in-game purchase endorsements in streamers’ YouTube videos?” The main themes uncovered through the interviews that show how streamers influence gamer perception were, *streamer as entertainer* (section 4.1), *streamer as inspiration to play* (section 4.2), *streamer as endorser* (section 4.3) It should be noted that the time gamers spent playing the game as well as their commitment to the game influenced the degree to which they consumed streamers’ YouTube videos as well as their likelihood of purchasing in-game items. As such this will be a recurring insight in this chapter as they influence streamer perception across all themes. Each selective code or theme consists of 3-4 axial codes or sub-themes that will be discussed in this chapter.

### 4.1. Streamer as an Entertainer

This theme answers the research question by explaining that gamers perceive streamers’ YouTube videos as entertainment. The specific means of how gamers consume a streamers consent are shown in the axial codes *consume content for fun*, *consume content for relaxation* and *consume content as an engaging learning experience*.

*Fun* in the form of funny content, or entertaining content is seen to be a key motivator in attracting viewers to a stream and also necessary to develop a positive relationship with viewers. The main methods of perceiving *fun* were related to the personality of the streamer and their gameplay, something that was showed by previous research (Nascimento, Ribeiro, Cerf, Cesario, Kaytoue, Raissi, Vasconcelos & Meira, 2014; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). Humor is one way of creating *fun* through the streamer’s own personality or the content they show on their channel, for example, when asked why they were motivated to watch a streamer’s video on YouTube gamers cited fun and entertainment as a main motivator. Max (24) stated that he primarily watches the streamer Nickmerc’s videos because “It’s just got a lot of jokes, a lot of jokes about lot of stuff. Um, and just like when he invites other streamers and he’s playing together with is also like making jokes with them and he

just seems like a nice guy”. While Kojo (23) stated that for his streamer Laser beam “his reactions are just funny to watch. So that's how we first discovered him through these Deathruns” (a player created game mode involving a difficult obstacle course rising in popularity for its versatility). Conversely participants noted that when they did not agree with a streamers personality or style of presenting content they were less inclined to consume their videos and did not seek their advice to improve gameplay as Rodri (24) stated “most likely a little bit their character. Ehh, like a toxic character right. Um, I don't know. I just don't like that personality very much. They might be good, but there are other good players. Right. Say if I don't really like them and I don't like what they're saying, yeah, then I'd rather not watch them”. These gamers illustrate how personality is an important factor in creating entertaining content, which was also stated to match gameplay in terms of importance for perceiving a video as entertaining. For some gamers high-level gameplay was considered a more important requirement for a fun video than others, for example Pete (23) who said “the gameplay, he's obviously a pro player so he's much better than me. Um, I find that entertaining” when asked what motivated him to watch Tfue’s videos over others. This is in line with previous insights by Sjöblom and Hamari (2017) who also note that high-level gameplay provides entertainment to viewers.

Aside from just *consuming content for fun*, some participants also stated that they watched a streamer’s YouTube video *to relax*, most often after work or during meals. Max (24) said “I think that's, that's what I mean by unwind, to come home after a long day and not think about the day anymore” and Andre (24) mentioned that he would watch videos “while eating, you know, sometimes you just put it on to have five minutes of entertainment”. In this case streamers act as a form of escapism and use entertainment to draw users out of their experience and into the game world. This is closely linked to theory concerning enjoyment of the game and the amount a gamer is willing to consume. Participants that have been playing FortNite (2017) for at least a year developed a stronger commitment to the game than the less frequent players; as such they consumed streamer’s videos for relaxation as well as entertainment. The more a player enjoys a game the more time they spend playing, and the more time they spend playing the more likely they are to consume other facets of the games contents such as streamer YouTube videos and in- game purchases (Wu & Liu, 2007; Hsiao & Chen, 2016; Hamari, 2015).

However *consuming content for fun* and *consuming content for relaxation* were not the only motivation for gamers to watch the streamer’s YouTube videos. A Majority of participants were motivated to *consume content as an engaging learning*

*experience* with streamers and used their YouTube videos to improve their own gameplay. In this case the learning process itself as entertaining. For example Rodri (24) stated “I think that also has something to do because I do like the guy, and I've kinda grown with him since I started. But in general he is a really good builder really quick really like I know, as a player is really good, strategically speaking and how he builds, how he edits and all this. So I really enjoy seeing that part. And actually learning from him, he does also a lot of, a lot of educational videos which is also one of the reasons that I got really into this guys stream because he actually taught you how to do what he was trying, what he was doing”. This quote shows how the learning process itself is seen as entertainment and how this encourages the gamer to consume more of the streamer’s content in order to improve their gameplay. Bartek (21) stated that he mainly watched SypherPK to “get better and some of those [other streamers] to see the way they play the game, you know, so you can adjust your, the way you play the game”. Streamers are seen as experts and entertainers of the games they play by gamers and are thus a source of information on the game, both in terms of play style but also for the latest information on game updates and mechanics. By packing the information in an entertaining format gamers are able to consume their content for self-improvement as well as entertainment, and may become closer to the streamer. Mati (24) stated that “he [SypherPK] talks a lot about updates and then, uh, regularly FortNite releases, updates, uh, every two weeks I believe. So, uh, he usually goes through the patch notes, analyzes them, you know, kind of gives his opinion on them. And uh, yeah, by that, you know, you can also benefit because then I don't have to read the patch notes myself”. For players wanting to improve their play style, the quality of information streamer’s were providing them with was of utmost importance. Gamer’s would only use a streamer’s information if they perceived them as having expertise, which was displayed through highly skilled gameplay as well as game knowledge as stated by Rodri (24) “I expect good gameplay. Right, I'd say and like good commentaries of his [SypherPK] own game. Because I think that's important overall at the end of the day, yeah you watch it sometimes for tips and tricks. So once you get good at the game, you also just want to see these guys doing the best”.

This theme shows that gamers perceive the *streamer as an entertainer* in three ways, by perceiving *their content as fun* or entertaining to watch, seeing it as a means to *relax* and be entertained and finally as an *engaging form of learning*. These perceptions motivated gamers to watch streamers whose content they enjoy, creating stronger ties between the streamer and gamer and thus allowing for more chance of the gamer consuming more of the streamer’s content and listening to what they have to say regarding the game and game mechanics (Park & Lee, 2011; Cha, 2011). Gamers noted that a toxic personality such as

screaming, cursing and being childish could turn them off of a streamer's content as this ruins their perception of fun and it was revealed that more committed gamers look to streamers with extremely high-level of play such as Tfue for information and entertainment, whereas less committed gamers would watch less skilled streamers with more humorous content such as Nickmercs. The more the streamer fits in with the gamers own play style the closer they felt to them and the more content they would consume of the streamer as mentioned by Mati (24) "it was just fun listening to him talk about his life experience, but also, you know, interact with his, uh, with his audience still. So that kind of resonated with me and I was like, man, this guy's really chill. I'd be down to chill, with him one day".

#### ***4.2: Streamer as an Inspiration to Play***

This theme answers the research question by explaining how gamer's perceive the *streamer as an inspiration to play* and is made of four axial codes. Streamers *inspire competition*, *inspire collaboration*, *inspire curiosity* and *inspire commitment* in gamers; this shapes their experience of the game and thus their perception.

Streamers *inspire competition* in gamers through their own high-level of gameplay. Gamers would watch this gameplay to learn from it and use it to improve their own game to achieve more wins and/or kills. Bartek (21) said he learned skills from SypherPk to "get better. You know, you can, you can learn so much yourself because there's people that played this on a much regular basis than you. So they will have the tips and tricks that you learn the longer you play". However gamers also noted that they would feel inspired to play after watching high-level gameplay to try and mimic the feelings they had while watching the streamer. For example Wisse (24) said "you tend to get in like a, some sort of fugue state or, or at least get a really good focus in those kinds of games [high-level] because you know that you can maybe possibly win or at least get a victory. And in those moments you tend to really play at your best. And because he [Tfue] is my, uh, vision of what's best and the way he plays, I might make different decisions on the basis of what I've seen in his videos". Gamers perceive streamers video content as instructions for use in games of their own, by providing information in their videos streamers allow gamers to realize their own potential and are thus encouraged to play more. This sense of achievement then inspires their competitiveness amongst friends and in online matches (Boyle, Connolly, Hainey & Boyle, 2012; Glas, 2015).

Gamers who were less competitive consumed streamers content and were then *inspired to collaborate* with friends. Many gamers noted that playing with friends or watching streamer videos with friends encouraged them to play more, for example Max (24) said “I do feel like the, the idea of playing a game together of, experiencing the same battles as you say, may, you know, create some bonding moments or some team building in a way because we need to communicate in order to win. And when you're not fighting, you're socializing and that, that makes up for lost time”. In this case it was the distance separating friends as well as their combined interest in the streamer Nickmercs and SypherPK that encourage the group to play more together and utilize what they learned from the streamer. Andrei (25) stated “I think, um, if my circle of friends or if people I know play at a certain time...that does motivate me to also hop on the game and play. Uh, just so networking of network effect basically is a big motivator for me. Umm another would be if I see some good footage, something intense, an intense battle, uh, hype me up basically. And I want to play after that just with a prospect that, oh, I need to get good” which highlight’s that the streamer may not even intend to motivate players but that their content may inspire gamers to play and collaborate with friends. This means streamers can inspire gamers unintentionally due to the entertaining nature of their content.

In other cases the streamer would showcase new game modes in FortNite and seeing this would encourage gamers to try these new modes. The streamer *inspires curiosity* in gamers by highlighting different in-game mechanics and modes that players can make use of. Recently FortNite has expanded its game modes from the standard battle royale modes of solo (play alone), duo (play with one friend), squads (play with 3 friends) by adding creative mode, where gamers can create their own maps and game types to share online and with up to 16 friends. Kojo (24) stated that “Actually I watched Lazerbeam do it [Deathrun] and I was like, you know what, actually, let me see if I can get through this Deathrun. So I also actually loaded it up for myself.” Here we see clearly how the streamer *inspires curiosity* by using humor as the streamer LazerBeam’s “reactions are just funny to watch. So that's how we first discovered him through these Deathruns”. Gamers are more willing to try out things based on streamers recommendations if there is a high-level of trust, or perception of expertise. The streamers are seen as having credibility and therefore the new information they suggest is more valid to gamers (Abidin & Ots, 2015; Chu & Kim, 2011).

Finally streamers *inspire commitment* in gamers through their videos by constantly keeping gamers in the loop with the latest game information. Streamers also package this information in their videos alongside humorous content that keeps players

interested in the game. The more committed gamers were to the game the more of the streamer's videos they would consume as stated by Wisse (24) "I would say I would watch a video with it or something, one, and sometimes I'm, I could also watch like six or something. It depended on how invested I was in the game". Streamers also promote the rewarding aspects of the game to players and show what benefits they can gain through commitment; Max (24) said, "I think it does a little bit. It adds to the incentive to keep playing" when referring to the rewards the streamer shows you and whether that keeps a gamer playing a game. Gamers are *inspired to commit* to the game because they trust the streamer and are enticed by the rewards the game offers (Greenheck, Johnson, Graves & Oak, 2018; Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017).

This theme shows that gamers perceive the *streamer as an inspiration to play* in four ways. Gamers perceive high-level gameplay as a means to *inspire competition* and *inspire collaboration* with friends. Streamers *inspire curiosity* with content that showcased new game mechanics such as new player created game modes and information on new updates on the game. The more time a gamer spent playing FortNite the more they looked to streamers for information on how to improve their own gameplay. Streamers therefore *inspire commitment* in-gamers towards the game but also to themselves, by maintaining credibility with their audience gamers will continue to consume their content as well as other content relating to the game (Abidin & Ots, 2015; Chu & Kim, 2011; Greenheck, Johnson, Graves & Oak, 2018; Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). In general it was revealed that the biggest obstacle to perceiving the *streamer as an inspiration to play* was the gamer's own level of commitment to the game, with gamers that played more being more committed and desiring to improve their gameplay. Gamers who played less and were also less committed to the game, for example Camiel (21) who played solely with his friends and never alone was not as committed to the game and did not perceive the *streamer as inspiration to play* but more as source of entertainment.

#### **4.3. Streamer as an Endorser**

This theme answers the research question by explaining how gamers perceive the *streamer as an endorser*. This theme is formed from four axial codes being *skins perceived as giving*

*social status, battle pass perceived to provide rewards, highlighting skin choice in the player's game, promoting new game mechanics.*

Skins are outfits for a player's avatar that can be obtained from the FortNite battle pass or purchased directly from the Epic Games store. As gamers consume streamer video content and become more invested in the game, they simultaneously also become more invested in the community skin subcultures surrounding the game. Wisse (24) mentioned "that some people tend to have like subcultures within the game, within the skins as then the soccer players are the best players or the, um, the John Wick skin had some type of, uh, image around it. So it does add to the game because a lot of people play it and ummm. Certain people that have certain skins will then get a certain image". The interviews revealed that gamers perceived skins as a means of social status within the game, where certain skin choices are associated with skill such as the scuba skin, while others such as the default are associated with a lack of skill. However certain streamers like Tfue have changed this perception, by using the default skin and performing high-level gameplay as mentioned by Dennis (24) "he [Tfue] would only have a default skin. So, you know, before he did that, whenever people saw someone with no skin, they were bots, you know, people would rush them because it was free kills. But after a while when the game was out because most people had a skin, whenever you saw a default skin, people would run away from it because those were usually the try hards". This notion of "try hard" was brought up by many participants, and refers to when a gamer becomes serious and puts all their focus into trying to win the game. Streamers therefore encourage gamers to *perceive skins as giving social status* by performing high-level gameplay in a certain skin. The streamer's community then creates the status surrounding the skin and all who purchase that skin become associated with that status. Gamers who work up to a certain skin they had been looking forward to note feeling rewarded by their achievement (Guo & Barnes, 2009; Cha, 2011; Boyle, Connolly, Hainey & Boyle, 2012) and expressed this was a key motivator for purchasing the battle pass.

One of the roles of streamers as sources of information on the game is the showcasing of the FortNite battle pass on their channels. This is done when streamers talk about the battle pass and showcase the skins they acquire from the pass in the game, to show gamers how the skin performs in-game as mentioned by Rodrigo (24) "that's part also of his content, right, he shows how the skins look to people. I think that's part of how, his selling point, right? Because he has them all people go and look at it like before they buy themselves." Aside from skins streamers also showcase other items players can receive from the battle pass that

has shaped the perception that gamers *perceive the battle pass to provide rewards*. The prospect of rewards was mentioned by many gamers as a motivator to play the game more and complete in-game challenges as mentioned by Kojo (24) “I realized that Oh, you can actually earn a whole bunch in the, in the battle pass and you earn more than just skins in the battle pass so I'm like, okay cool, let me actually get the battle pass and work my way to get those skins”. The feeling of being rewarded was also associated with completing the in-game challenges. Gamers noted that certain challenges available to battle pass owners which unlocked specific reactive skins, skins which change appearance in-game, were other aspects that made the battle pass feel rewarding. Bartek (21) said “ Now you have that reactive skins are the ones that you have challenges for. So you know, you've got to work for, to extend your skin. So last season it was the pirates skin, I really enjoyed that one. You know, how as you progress, you know, it expanded and it was even cooler”. This feeling of being rewarded and achieving rewards after consistent commitment to playing the game encourages gamers to play more to seek even more rewards (Guo & Barnes, 2009; Cha, 2011; Boyle, Connolly, Hainey & Boyle, 2012), in some cases looking to streamers for information on how to progress.

The showcasing of in-game items by streamers not only serves as promotion for the battle pass but also provides information to gamers on *skin choice in the player's game*. Most of the participants who were more committed to the game mentioned that they would watch a streamers showcase of new skins to visualize what it would look like in-games of their own. Going further than just aesthetics streamers such as SypherPK provide commentary on the skins playability, for instance if a skin has a glitch that allows its to be seen behind cover, or if it takes up too much space on the screen. Mati (24) mentioned, “I did catch myself wearing, you know, or buying skins that I saw Sypher use and I thought they looked pretty cool on him and then I would to get it myself”. Although the *streamer is perceived as an endorser* and SypherPK is Mati's favourite streamer, the skin must still be appealing to the gamer to be desirable. Even if a player feels they are unaffected they noted that streamers still shape the discourse and game trends surrounding general skin choice as Pete (23) stated, “I know a bunch of people who will intentionally go out and buy a skin, just because their favorite streamer uses it. So I do think that they do have weight over it. I just don't care particularly”. This shows that gamers trust their favorite streamer to a certain extent and want to imitate them in-games of their own (Abidin & Ots, 2015; Chu & Kim, 2011; Greenheck, Johnson, Graves & Oak, 2018; Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), as they feel their gameplay can be enhanced.

Further factors *highlighting skin choice in the player's game* was the feeling gamers had while playing with the skin. As mentioned previously gamers perceive skins as influencing their gameplay and all participants who were committed to the game and played regularly had a try hard skin which they felt they played better in due to a greater feeling of confidence (Marder, Gattig, Collins, Pitt, Kietzmann & Erz, 2019) as well as feeling more joy from the resulting gameplay (Park & Lee, 2011; Cha, 2011). This feeling was created when watching streamers perform extremely high-levels of gameplay, which gamers hoped to replicate in-games of their own as mentioned by MXM (22) “the streamer was called Darkotas or Dark and he had the skin, it was called the Snorkel Ops. And that streamer is known for being like really good with the sniper and he always used the same skin. The Snorkel Ops. So in my mind, I, I was like, okay, so if I'm going to use the skin I have to be really good with the sniper. So I like kind of tried to imitate him and just go for ridiculous snipes And for some reason it started working” and thus streamers can endorse skin choice in a player's game by showcasing consistently high game play while using a certain skin repeatedly.

Finally gamers perceive *streamers as endorsers* in regards to new information on the game by *promoting new game mechanics*. The rising trend revealed in the interviews noted that streamers are increasingly creating unique in-game content and game modes and showcasing it on their YouTube channel. New game modes available in the Creative mode of FortNite such as Deathruns, or end game simulations are perceived as being entertaining and encourage gamers to try out these modes themselves Andre (24) said, “I think they promote the game because you find new things, new, cool things that you can do in the game right. And um, yeah, they show off the games, full potential and the competitive side kind of, so that's cool” whereas Kojo (24) even tried one of these new modes out himself after watching his favorite streamer LazerBeam fail to complete one. Streamers are therefore seen as *promoting new game mechanics* due to their reputation as opinion leaders in the industry, gamers who consume their content see these game modes and due to the association of the streamer being credible (Abidin & Ots, 2015; Chu & Kim, 2011; Greenheck, Johnson, Graves & Oak, 2018; Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), they feel encouraged to try out these new modes themselves. Gamers also noted that they would look to streamers for information on the new “Meta” of the game. Meta refers the most popular strategies and techniques within a game; for example, when FortNite was first released the “Meta” was for players to have two shotguns to avoid slow reload times. FortNite releases updates bi-weekly and in these updates weapons, vehicles and items are removed or added which changes the Meta. Pete

(23) would check Tfue's channel to see "if there's any buffed [made stronger] or nerfed [made weaker] weapons, things of that nature. Like what's the new Meta really, like I'll just see his load out and I'll be like alright, I'll see if that works with my game play". Here again we can see that gamers are not idle recipients of messages but take the streamers advice into consideration alongside their own needs. If the streamer is not perceived as being expert enough to understand the current strategies in the game, then they are no longer seen as a source of information but rather a form of entertainment and thus lose the perception of expertise (Perry, 2012; Wu, 2016; Lin, Bruning, & Swarna, 2018). However if the streamer is perceived as being an expert, such as Tfue, then they create the Meta, as Dennis (24) said, "if you watch Tfue and he's using another gun and someone asks him, why are you using that gun? It's bad, you know, and Tfue tells you it's good and he shows you why it's good, you know? Um, next thing you know, that, that weapons popular.... becomes popular in no time just, you know streamers. They definitely create the meta" and so we see that the gamers own perception of a streamers expertise and level of trustworthiness shape the perception of the *streamer as an endorser* in relation to *promoting new game mechanics*.

This theme shows that gamers perceive *streamers as endorsers* in regards to *skins perceived as giving social status, battle pass perceived to provide rewards*, and that they *highlight skin choice in the player's game and promote new game mechanics*. *Skins are perceived to have social status* due to streamers creating a reputation for the skin through use in their own games, gamers then purchase or unlock the skin to imitate their streamer of choice in the hopes it improves their own gameplay. They also *perceive the battle pass as a source of rewards* that are promoted by streamers in their educational videos. These videos serve as advertisement for the skins and battle pass so gamers can judge whether the item is worth buying for them. Streamers *highlight skin choice in player's games* through showcase videos of these skins, but also inspiring certain associations with gamers in regards to the skin. Gamers choose these skins based on the relationship they have with the streamer as well as their personal association with the skin, for example if they want to play better they put on a skin that they feel more confident in or they saw a streamer perform well in. And lastly streamers are seen as *promoters of new game mechanics* as they shape the discourse surrounding the game such as which game modes are most popular, which weapons and strategies are best to use and what new changes have occurred with the new game updates.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Main Findings

This research set out to explore how gamers construct their perception regarding product endorsements in streamer's YouTube videos. A qualitative study of twelve in-depth semi-structured was conducted revealing three distinct ways in which gamers perceive streamers and their YouTube video content. The research question:

*How do FortNite gamers perceive in-game item's endorsements in streamers' YouTube videos?*

is answered by proposing three sub questions.

*SQ1: How do gamers perceive streamers content?*

*SQ2: How are streamers perceived as source of inspiration or motivation to play?*

*SQ3: How do gamers perceive in-game items' use and discussion in streamer's YouTube videos?*

In relation to the first sub-question, the results show that gamers perceive *streamers as entertainers* and typically consume their video content because the high-level gameplay, and information provided by the streamers is considered *fun, relaxing*, and as an engaging learning experience. As such streamers are seen as the authority on in-game knowledge and their level of expertise draws in different types of gamers. For example this research revealed that less committed players of FortNite looked to streamers more for *fun* and *relaxation* and more committed players looked to streamers for looking for an engaging *learning experience*. This is inline with previous studies regarding eWOM and influencer marketing, where the greater the credibility of the influencer, the more trust a consumer has for them and it is more likely that they will consume their content or products (Abidin & Ots, 2015; Chu & Kim, 2011; Greenheck, Johnson, Graves & Oak, 2018; Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017).

In relation to the second sub-question gamers perceive the *streamer as an inspiration to play*. Through high-level gameplay streamers inspire gamers to be *competitive* and through community engagement they inspire gamers to be *collaborative*, often times playing with other famous streamers to highlight the excitement playing with friends can give. Being informative in their videos *inspires curiosity*, as gamers felt inclined to check streamer YouTube channels to learn new tactics and then apply this knowledge in games of their own. Finally streamers *inspire commitment* in gamers by showing them the best the game has to offer and keeping their interest through humorous, high-level or unique content. This simultaneously encourages gamers to play more and consume more of the streamers video in order to learn or be entertained. This is inline with previous research conducted on the motivations for play in games, which were typically associated with enjoyment, and the deepness of the game world as streamers provide more depth to the game by showing its full potential thus becoming an *inspiration to play* (Wu & Liu, 2007; Guo & Barnes, 2009; Park & Lee, 2011; Boyle, Connolly, Hainey & Boyle, 2012; Hsiao & Chen, 2016).

In relation to the third sub-question gamers perceive *streamers as endorsers* as they create the environment where *skins are perceived as giving social status* by performing extraordinary feats while wearing a skin, gamers begin to associate that skin with skill and purchase it to mimic this skill in games of their own. This is also the case for the FortNite battle pass, which is perceived to provide rewards. Streamers then showcase the battle pass rewards and provide commentary on them. This commentary positions the battle pass as a necessary addition to the game that provides extra rewards and therefore enjoyment for gamers. Streamers also *highlight skin choice in the player's game* by showcasing how the skin looks in games of their own, they allow gamers to visualize what they would look like in their own games and if the gamers like how it looks they are encouraged to purchase it. These skins may also be associated with the streamers skill and may be selected because the gamer wants to play at their best, which they envision is how their favorite streamer plays. Since streamers are seen as experts and in some cases ambassadors of the game they are also perceived as *promoting new game mechanics* such as new game modes, new strategies and exploits for gamers to use. This provides more informative and entertaining content for gamers and in some cases encourages them to try these game modes and strategies in games of their own, deepening their game world and allowing for more enjoyment. This insight is supported by theory on enjoyment by gamers (Wu & Liu, 2007; Guo & Barnes, 2009; Park & Lee, 2011; Hsiao & Chen, 2016), theory on achievement in gamer's own games (Cha,

2011; Boyle, Connolly, Hainey & Boyle, 2012; Abidin & Ots, 2015; Glas, 2015) as well as theory in eWOM and influencer marketing (Chu & Kim, 2011; Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Greenheck, Johnson, Graves & Oak, 2018).

## ***5.2 Theoretical implications***

Previous research on this topic focused primarily on how companies can use influencers or eWOM to promote their brand (or on what motivated gamers to play and purchase in-game items) (cite) while this research highlights a critical perspective on how gamers construct their perception of streamers by consuming their videos on YouTube. Gamers are drawn to the streamer's YouTube as they are seeking entertainment, the gamers then become inspired to play more due to the streamers content and finally they perceive elements in the streamers videos as endorsements which encourage them to try out new game modes or purchase the FortNite battle pass or skins to recreate the streamers experience for themselves.

This research has built upon existing research in the field of influencer marketing and online purchase behavior in the context of digital video game stores by providing a qualitative outlook on the motivations gamers have when interacting with in-game elements. This research implies that video game streamers should be considered in the same way as influencers in other fields, as they operate in similar ways. Video game streamers gain popularity in similar ways to other influencers, and are held to the same level of constant scrutiny, whereby followers can be gained and lost as a direct result of the streamers content or performance. However the more relatable and actionable the content is, the more comfortable gamers become looking to a streamer for *entertainment* and *to learn in an entertaining way*. Gamers then become *inspired to play* in order to replicate what they have learned in games of their own, when they succeed to replicating these techniques they become closer to the streamer. Once the gamer is sufficiently close to the streamer and consumes their content regularly they then *perceive them as an endorser* and attribute value to the items the streamers use in their videos. Therefore existing theories on **trustworthiness** (Chu & Kim, 2011; Nascimento et al, 2014; Sjöblom, Törhönen, Hamari, & Macey, 2017), **attractiveness** (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Perry, 2012; Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Greenheck, Johnson, Graves & Oak, 2018) and **expertise** (Perry, 2012; Wu, 2016; Lin,

Bruning, & Swarna, 2018) all contribute to motivations to watch a streamer and believe in their content. Whereas the existing theories on **achievement** (Guo & Barnes, 2009; Cha, 2011; Boyle, Connolly, Hailey & Boyle, 2012), **enjoyment** (Wu & Liu, 2007; Hamari, 2015; Hsiao & Chen, 2016) and **online identity building** (Guo & Barnes, 2009; Park, & Lee, 2011; Marder, Gattig, Collins, Pitt, Kietzmann & Erz, 2019) what factors may shape a gamer's perception in regards to in-game items and mechanics.

As such this research serves a bridge between game studies and influencer marketing studies as it sits in the intersection between determining how gamers construct the perception of their favorite streamer and how this perception shapes their behavior towards in-game elements.

### ***5.3 Social Implications***

This research was initially conducted due to the rising popularity and profitability of free-to-play gaming as well as the explosive growth of the videogame industry. One major social issue was that of video game addiction in children and the fact that children believe the virtual item in the game store provide some boost to performance.

This research explains how gamers develop closeness to the streamer and how this encourages them to watch more of this streamers content that was also seen as motivator to play more. If the inspiration to play is not managed, gamers can become very invested in the game and over time become encouraged to purchase items from the in-game store as they strive to imitate their favorite streamer. Skins were perceived as improving play due to the association of the skin and streamer, where gamers noted that they felt they played better after purchasing skins with a certain in-game cultural connotation. Left unchecked this could encourage new gamers to make more purchases within the online store to gain a sense of achievement and feel more confident while playing. However this may create negative experiences for gamers when their skill does not improve despite the purchase of new skins falsely perceived to improve play. Streamers are perceived as endorsers and so should be regulated and forced to disclosed advertising intent in the same way other brands do when producing content on YouTube. With more disclosure regarding advertising gamers can be informed that they don't just watch the streamer for *entertainment or learning* but that they are simultaneously having items promoted to them while being entertained.

This research is also socially relevant to video game developers as it provides a thick description of how gamers perceive the game mechanics, video game store and virtual good design in ways that encourage play and purchase as well as the sharing of user generated content with other gamers, such as the case with the FortNite (2017) creative mode. Video game developers, specifically Epic Games could utilize insights in this research for developing more game modes that cater to the motivations of specific gamers, making the game more inclusive and possibly expanding the player base.

#### ***5.4 Limitations of Research***

This research had several limitations. There was a limitation in regards to sampling as only males were found for the interviews due to the sampling being done through the researchers personal network. As such the results are highlight the specific experience of male FortNite gamers who account for approximately 80% of the player base, leaving 20% undetermined. Therefore if the research was to be conducted again, specific attention should be given to ensuring female FortNite (2017) gamers are included in the sample. The gamers interviewed were similar in age ranging from 21-25, which again represents 80% of the FortNite player base, however there is a substantial percentage of the population below this age and they most likely have a very different way of perceiving streamers, which presents another limitation and opportunity to further this research.

There was a minor limitation during the interview process in regards to last minute cancellations and unexplored avenues of interesting insights in interviews. The insights relate to the increased competitive tournaments of FortNite and how this may drive interest in the game and products within the game. With the addition of FortNite (2017) Creative Mode the game has been opened up to players to produce user-generated content such as Deathruns. It will be interesting to see how these new mechanics shape the content surrounding the game on YouTube as well as new avenues for advertising within the game through product placement or outside the game through public announcements of collaborations such as the collaboration with the Marvel cinematic Universe during the launch of the Marvel Avengers movies in 2018 and 2019.

This research sought to explain how product endorsements in streamers YouTube videos are perceived by gamers, however none of the streamer videos were exclusively in-game item showcases. As such this research is limited as it explores how the gamers perceive their own perception but not does directly capture their opinions when consuming virtual item showcase videos in their own time. Many participants mentioned that they would only purchase items if they like them, but struggled to explain why they liked certain items, as such further research could be conducted to define what elements within items gamers value most.

### ***5.5 Suggestions for Future Research***

To ensure future validity further research should seek to quantify this influence on a larger scale and in different types of game. As this research focused on the specific case of FortNite it is unclear whether the same results would be found in gamers of pay-to-play games, as the free aspect served as a primary motivator to initially get gamers interested in the game. FortNite is extremely popular, however it is not clear as to how much the free aspect of the game contributes to its success. In order to understand how the free aspect influences the popularity of a game a quantitative study on how much more gamers prefer this type of game compared to other game types should be conducted. Insights from this research could highlight what specific game mechanics mean the most to gamers, and would give game developers more information on how to create popular user-friendly games.

Future qualitative research can also be conducted on a younger group of gamers with more female representation to ensure the results found in this research are applicable in other circumstances. This research can also be conducted using quantitative methods to determine whether the hours watched of a streamer determine the likelihood of purchasing items from that same streamer, in order to understand the causal implication of the new rising trend of video game streamers.

Similarly research should be conducted on what virtual goods appeal most to gamers and why in order to develop legislation on a safe means to allow children to play these games without fear of falling victim to subliminal advertising techniques. The video game

industry has exploded in terms of its revenue and so must be complimented by ethical checks to ensure it remains a safe form of entertainment.

Many participants mentioned the FortNite world cup as something that may be interesting to the research. The FortNite world cup is a form of Esports tournament, which is open to all FortNite players around the world. It began in April and runs throughout the summer till the end of July. It has three main forms of competition being the regular open online tournament with \$1 million prizes, the creative tournament and the world cup finals with a prize pool of \$30 million (Epic Games 2019). This phenomenon is of utmost importance for researchers to explore from the perspective of gamers as to how this tournament shapes their perception of the game or how it affects the way they play the game. The world cup was pervasive enough to be mentioned by multiple participants and thus seems like a promising avenue for research into how Esports tournaments work as influencers to shape gamer perception regarding the game.

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## Appendix

### *Appendix A: Interview Guide*

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Demographics  |  |
| Informed Consent Intro  | Please know that your information will be anonymized and solely used for the purpose of this research. |
| What is your name & How old are you?  |  |
| What do you study, if no study what is your profession?   |  |
| How much would you say that you play FortNite?<br>-Why do you play?   |  |
| Do you watch streamers on YouTube or any other platform?<br>-Who?<br>-How often would you say?<br>-Why?   |  |
| Have you bought Fornite battle pass or items from the online store?<br>-How often?<br>-How much roundabout would you say?<br>-Any reason in particular why you bought a certain item? |  |

| Theoretical | Interview Question | Explanation |
|-------------|--------------------|-------------|
|             |                    |             |

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| Concept   |  |   |
| <p>Concepts accessing the interviewee's opinion of their favorite streamer. The concepts of attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise all help explain the relationship between the user and streamer to form, and this relationship influences how credible and thus believable a streamer is to a user.</p> |  |   |
| Attractiveness  | <p>What makes you want to watch your streamers content over others?</p> <p>-Is it the streamer themselves, their personality or the actions they are performing?</p> <p>-What about their personality is attractive to you?</p> <p>Does the physical appearance of (Streamer) make them attractive to you?</p> <p>What would make a streamer unattractive to you, What wouldn't you like them to do or say in their videos?</p> <p>Why would you not follow a certain streamer? The way they look, the content, their following?</p> | <p>This concept is important as a higher opinion of the streamer and content makes viewers more likely to accept persuasive messages and product endorsements. The more the person likes the streamer the more importance they give to their messages and greater influence the streamer has over the user.</p> |

|                        |  |   |
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| <p>Trustworthiness</p> | <p>- Would you say that you trust him?</p> <p>Do you consider the streamer to be a reliable source of in-game strategy information on FortNite?</p> <p>Is the streamer useful for proposing information on use of in-game items, loot locations and challenges?</p> <p>Do you remember a specific example?</p> <p>What other kinds of information do you expect this streamer to provide you with?</p> <p>How long would you say that you have trusted this streamers content?</p> <p>Is there a reason why you would not trust a streamer?</p> <p>Do you remember a concrete example in which you did not trust something that a streamer said?</p> | <p>Trustworthiness or credibility improves the likelihood that a message is listened to and understood, or acted upon, thus it is important to understand how credible the participants think the streamers are. A more credible source would allow users to believe the product endorsements more. The goal of this section is to understand what elements in the streamer a user values. And how does this shape the users knowledge of the game.</p> |
|------------------------|--|---|

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|------------------|--|---|
| <p>Expertise</p> | <p>Lets look at a video of your streamer, what do you think of this segment here: Show video clip of high-level gameplay of favorite streamer.</p> <p>Do you think the streamer is knowledgeable about FortNite?</p> <p>-Why do you expect this streamer is knowledgeable particular for information on FortNite?</p> <p>How does the streamer stand out from other streamers you watch in relation to their knowledge of the game?</p> <p>What actions should be taken for the streamer to be considered an expert?</p> <p>Would you say he is an expert? Why?</p> <p>-Does the fact that he is an expert matter to you? -Why?</p> <p>Have you tried to learn from the streamer? -In what ways?</p> | <p>Expertise provides entertainment value to the streamers videos. Through high-level gameplay they differentiate themselves and draw in followers who watch for entertainment purposes but also to improve their own gameplay. As this concept is closely linked with entertainment, clips of video of the interviewee’s favorite streamer will be used to show concrete examples of “expertise” and then assess the interviewee’s opinion of the clip and streamer.</p> |
|------------------|--|---|

-How did that influence the way  
you felt about the streamer?

Video: TBD

Concepts referring to player's perceptions of own experience within the game. The concepts of achievement, enjoyment and identity building assess the way users feel while playing and whether they notice how different in-game elements influence their experience.

|                    |   |   |
|--------------------|---|---|
| <p>Achievement</p> | <p>How does playing FortNite make you feel?<br/>         -Why do you do it?</p> <p>How do you feel when you complete a challenge in FortNite?<br/>         -Did this change when you have or didn't have the battle pass?</p> <p>Were you able to complete challenges with advice from your favorite streamer?<br/>         -Do you remember a concrete example?<br/>         -How did this make you feel about the streamer?</p> <p>How does having access to battle pass content make you feel?<br/>         -Do you think it allows you to play better?<br/>         -Why?</p> | <p>This construct is aimed at uncovering the gamers behaviour regarding in-game items and what impact they believe they have on their gameplay and feelings towards the game. It is important because some gamers purchase these items thinking they will improve gameplay or show status. Additionally this construct assesses if the streamer has any influence over a players game experience from the players own perception.</p> |
|--------------------|---|---|

|                  |  |  |
|------------------|--|--|
| <p>Enjoyment</p> | <p>Can you recall a moment where you were watching a streamer and you enjoyed his video?</p> <p>-Can you describe what was happening and why you liked it?</p> <p>-Have you ever recalled this experience while in a game of your own?</p> <p>How does the streamer use items, such as vehicles and building objects in their videos that you enjoy watching?</p> <p>-Why does this bring you joy?</p> | <p>The enjoyment construct will highlight the motivations behind purchasing in-game content and streams. Theory posits that enjoyment is one of the key reasons for consuming streams and purchasing in-game items as they may subconsciously encourage more play.</p> |
|------------------|--|--|

Identity Building

Do you like the outfits your streamer's avatar wears?

-How does your own avatar look? Can you please describe?

-How is this related to the way that you feel when you are playing the game?

-Do you like the way your avatar looks?

- Do you choose the way your avatar looks based on recommendations of the streamer or the way his avatar looks? Why?

-Did you notice a change in your feelings when you got new items for your avatar?

-How did this change from feelings you had before?

Tell me about your items and player set up in FortNite?

-Why did you choose these items, do you think the streamer influence your decision at all?

-How important are in-game items from the store to you? Why?

What makes an item stand out to you?

Identity building was another key reason for in-game purchases as in-game items form a hierarchical function of showing status and differentiates gamers online, as such it is important to understand how online identity and in-game items are linked.

-Have you seen this item used  
by the streamer?

Do you think an item is more  
valuable if you see your  
favorite streamer using it?

-Why?

Is there anything else you feel that I should know?

Do you have any questions?

Thank you for your time and participation in my research.

*Appendix B: Code Tree*

| Selective Code (Theme)             | Axial Code                                  | Open Code (Examples)  |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Streamer as Entertainer            | Consume content for fun                     | Watch for entertainment<br><br>I watch it because its fun<br><br>His videos just make me laugh  |
|                                    | Consume content for relaxation              | I watch to unwind<br><br>After a long day its good to play to relax<br><br>It just takes my mind of things  |
|                                    | Consume content as an engaging way to learn | Makes me want to improve on my gameplay<br><br>The videos are fun and you learn something as well<br><br>I enjoy improving my gameplay which is I why I watch him |
| Streamer as an Inspiration to play | Inspire competition                         | They make me want to play better<br><br>I just want to get on and play after seeing their videos<br><br>He makes me want to improve                               |
|                                    | Inspire collaboration                       | Want to see if I can do this with friends<br><br>I'll play with friends<br><br>After watching Ill see if my friends are online                                    |
|                                    | Inspire curiosity                           | I'll try it out in games of my own<br><br>I wanted to see if its possible   |

|                      |   |  |
|----------------------|---|--|
|                      |   | I never thought about it in that way before  |
|                      | Inspire commitment                        | I want to play more and be the best<br><br>Showed me that I can get better if I practice<br><br>So that's what happens when you focus on improving   |
| Streamer as endorser | Skins perceived as giving social status   | He must be good because of that skin<br><br>I play better in this skin<br><br>This is for sure a try hard skin   |
|                      | Battle pass perceived to provide rewards  | The battle pass definitely gives an incentive to play<br><br>Why buy skins when you can get the battle pass and work towards earning them<br><br>It makes grinding worth it                        |
|                      | Highlighting skin choice in player's game | I'll play better if I choose this skin<br><br>Dark used it, so I'll use it and be just as good at sniping<br><br>All the pros get this type of skin, so that's why I got it                        |
|                      | Promoting new game mechanics              | I saw him trying out this new game mode and tried it out myself<br><br>Its unexpected gameplay which is what I like<br><br>I never knew about this game mode, it looked fun so I decided to try it |