

## 16 Emoting Culture on Twitch.tv: The Removal and Reinstatement of PogChamp

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Visual paralanguage is arguably one of the central elements of digital communication. Memes, emoji, and gifs (both animated and not) all carry enormous amounts of unspoken information that can be readily decoded with the right knowledge. In this chapter, I discuss Twitch's platform-specific emoji—emotes—by focusing on the events surrounding the changes to the PogChamp emote in 2021. After describing the history of PogChamp, I set up the politics of the decision to alter the emote as an indirect response to the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021. I argue that emotes exist and are understood in relation to broader social and cultural arrangements. Through the evolution of PogChamp, its use across the platform, and the steps taken by Twitch to distance the values of the platform from those of PogChamp's face, I trace the corporate decision-making process through the desired perception of the platform. Within this evolution lie clear attempts to redress issues of representation and visibility that have long been a part of streaming culture on the platform, inherited from hegemonic identity traits that have historically dominated gaming culture. Through PogChamp, I show how emotes are social and cultural artifacts that perform essential work to the success of the platform and reflect and respond to events occurring well beyond the bounds of the platform.

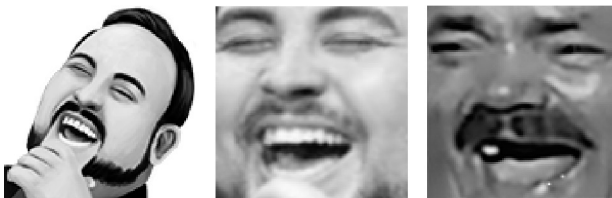
### What Are Emotes?

In this chapter, I take Twitch as a case study to demonstrate how emotes function as social and cultural artifacts. Arguably, the most popular live streaming platform in the world, Twitch has enough attention and a long enough history to warrant examination here. Although this chapter is focused on Twitch, where emotes are an important part of the culture, economy, and

mundane user practice, the relationship between visual communication tools and broader culture persists across other digital platforms—live streaming and not. There are different types of emotes that dictate who can use them and where they can be used. These include the following:

- *Global* emotes—these can be used by anyone with a Twitch account in any stream.
- *Subscriber* emotes—these are streamer-specific emotes that can be accessed for a monthly subscription fee. While subscribed to a streamer, a spectator can use subscriber emotes in any stream.
- *Third-party* emotes—these are facilitated by external platforms like BetterTTV (BTTV) and FrankerFaceZ (FFZ). They can be used only in streams that have been connected to these services and are visible only when spectators have the appropriate extension installed in their browser.

It is worth noting that there are other types of emotes that are significant to the economy and culture of Twitch in their own ways; however, only those just listed will be discussed in this chapter. Just like emoji, emotes are more than just pictures. They are used to color the text of a chat message, often to clarify the intended tone of a message. For example, the Kappa emote is a grayscale image of one of Justin.tv's (Twitch's predecessor's) original Internet Relay Chat (IRC) engineers, Josh DeSeno, that is recognized across the platform as indicating sarcasm. Sometimes emotes are used in isolation to communicate a specific reaction, like the LUL emote, a play on "LOL" that depicts the late video game reviewer and Twitch streamer John "TotalBiscuit" Bain laughing (figure 16.1). Emotes like this are performative in an Austinian sense, namely "in saying what I do, I actually perform that action" (Austin 2013, 22). The action is an expression of an emotion or affect that a spectator wants to communicate to a streamer or other spectators. By



**Figure 16.1**

LUL (left), LULW (middle), and KEKW (right) emotes.

sending “LUL,” I am signaling laughter or laughing virtually (even if I’m not laughing). In this sense, an emote (noun) is used to emote (verb). Following this line of thought, I refer to emotes as “virtual” speech acts.

Many third-party emotes consist of variants of other emotes. These can look quite similar but have different connotations that emerge through customary use. For instance, LULW and KEKW are both third-party emotes that indicate laughter (figure 16.1). The “W” stands for “wide” and refers to the specific framing of the subjects’ faces as used in these emotes. LULW is a rotated and zoomed-in version of LUL, and KEKW has the same framing of the face of the Spanish actor and comedian Juan Joya Borja, whose laughter during an interview with Jesus Quintero in 2007 went viral. Different streamers and stream collectives have different preferences among the three. Some Twitch users feel that KEKW is toxic and is used in a way that laughs at a streamer rather than with them. In contrast, others express opinions about a natural progression from LUL to LULW to KEKW. While there isn’t any universal agreement about connotations associated with each of these emotes, it is largely agreed upon that they do have different connotations. Through the rest of this chapter, I will use PogChamp to extend on this notion that these small images function as more than just virtual paralanguage, but are instrumental in defining and communicating values and the culture of Twitch. More than this, they demonstrate connections between platform features, user practices, and the external cultures within which Twitch users operate.

### Emotes, Sociality, and Gaming Cultures

The body of literature on live streaming continues to grow substantially, following its popularity. Scholars are producing a broad range of work on the practice and, as one of the central features of the Twitch platform, emotes are relevant to much of this.

Sociality, and the subsequent sense of community within streams, plays an important role in the way that users engage with Twitch. A shared vernacular, in particular a shared *understanding* of the shared vernacular, is critical to any sense of online community. That is to say that emotes can become bonding tools for Twitch users. This in turn leads to an increase in viewing time and following and subscribing to particular streamers (Sjöblom and Hamari 2017). The connection between social interactions and financially contributing to streams is strong (Hilvert-Bruce et al. 2018), and this

is heavily reliant on how emotes are treated within specific streams. The treatment of PogChamp ruptured some of this sociality, as streamers and spectators alike discovered the bounds of their comfort with the emote as its connotations were heavily and abruptly altered. While stream interactions are tempered by the style and foci of the streamer's communication (Giertz et al. 2020), and hence streamers have a reasonable amount of control over collective communication, spectator agency still plays a significant role in characterizing stream interactions. This sentiment is echoed in recent studies that emphasize copresence within live streams (Diwanji et al. 2020) or consider live streaming as a copformance between users (Li et al. 2019). In other words, how a particular stream collective navigates the kind of cultural shift represented by the PogChamp in this chapter is a negotiation between streamers and spectators.

The economic and social impacts of emotes as a platform feature are significant, particularly because of their relationships with identities of both their subjects and their users. As mentioned in the previous section, emotes are vernacular tools that characterize communication on the platform (Ford et al. 2017). But more than that, as I have previously argued, they are memetic and become mobilized to define and perform collective identity (Jackson 2021). This is apparent through the existence and distinct uses of emote variants. T. L. Taylor (2018) observes the importance of the identity emotes' subjects when she notes the racist applications of the TriHard emote (figure 16.2)—depicting the Black streamer Trihex—often used in situations where Black characters appear in games. To add to this, the global emote cmonBruh depicts a Black person (whose name is not widely known) performing a facial expression of confusion, concern, or disbelief (figure 16.2). A more ambivalent emote, cmonBruh is often used to flag a particular stream comment as racist. This use aligns well with the name, as



**Figure 16.2**

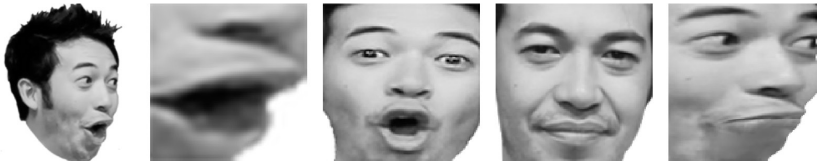
The cmonBruh (left) and TriHard (right) emotes.

one could almost imagine the performative “Are you serious?” depicted by the facial expression. However, this emote also has racist uses identical to those of TriHard. One of the great difficulties surrounding emotes like these is that representing the diverse Twitch user base lends visibility that is easily abused (and becomes abusive)—a challenge that I will discuss in more detail when recounting the PogChamp narrative. To combat this, activism around diversifying live streaming spaces and practices has arisen in response to the values underpinning these offensive emote uses. For example, AnyKey’s GLHF (meaning “Good Luck Have Fun”) pledge (Brewer, Romine, and Taylor 2020), which has its own visual tag: the GLHF badge that appears next to users’ names in chats.

There is an essential movement within game studies to resist the dominance of what has been called the “default” player: white, cisgendered, heterosexual, able-bodied, young, middle-class men (Chess 2017). As Twitch is mostly known as a video game live streaming platform, it has inherited this notion of a default user, which heavily informs the reception and use of emotes that represent marginalized users and thereby perpetuates their marginalized status. Kishonna L. Gray (2017) asserts that by not fitting into the default identity of the platform, people of color disrupt the norms of Twitch simply through their presence—their mere presence is an act of deviance. Mia Consalvo (2018) describes the transgressive play that live streaming enables through a case study of Kaceytron, who simultaneously meets and resists gendered assumptions around gaming capital and skill. Mark R. Johnson (2019) examines the costs and benefits of streaming as a career for those with chronic conditions. Extending this beyond users to platform governance, Cullen and Ruberg (2019) and Ruberg (2021) uncover the sexual politics woven into the very fabric of live streaming platforms through their policy documents. When a moment of social crisis occurs, like the events leading up to changes to PogChamp, the platform’s architecture—including users’ values, attitudes and identities, and platform policy and features—is mobilized to react.

### Introducing PogChamp

PogChamp is a global Twitch emote, characterized by a face with an open mouth and eyes wide in excitement. One of the earliest Twitch emotes, the face of PogChamp until January 2021 was Ryan “Gootecks” Gutierrez (figure 16.3). Gutierrez is known for cofounding Cross Counter TV—an online



**Figure 16.3**

From left to right: PogChamp (up to January 2021), Pog, PogU, WeirdChamp, PauseChamp.

network dedicated to fighting game content—and his history of competitive fighting game play, most notably in the *Street Fighter* series. PogChamp is another example of emotes as virtual speech acts, as the facial expression is intended to communicate how the user is feeling. Specifically, PogChamp is associated with hype—an excitement/anticipation hybrid. The emote often follows a success or skillful display in-game, when it allows spectators to share in the success, or a generally exciting occurrence in-stream.

PogChamp has also sprouted several third-party variants (figure 16.3). These depict Gutfierrez, though they are typically used to emphasize different constituent elements of hype. For example:

- Pog—An extreme close-up of Gutfierrez’s mouth, indicating greater excitement than PogChamp.
- PogU—The same facial expression but facing the camera, indicating more surprise than PogChamp.
- WeirdChamp—A different facial expression, communicating a judgment that what was said was weird or odd.
- PauseChamp—A different facial expression that suggests more anticipation than PogChamp (e.g., waiting for the streamer to notice something that the chat has already seen).

As was the case with LUL, some of these uses vary among stream collectives, particularly PogChamp, Pog, and PogU, which can be read quite similarly. PogChamp and its variants have become interwoven with hype on Twitch.

### Not Very Pog: The Removal of PogChamp

Following the death of a woman during the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, Gutfierrez tweeted the question, “Will there be civil

unrest for the woman who was executed inside the Capitol today or will the #MAGAMartyr die in vain?" (figure 16.4). Although Guttierrez is not officially affiliated with Twitch, the face of one of their oldest and most popular emotes inciting violence in this way was a step too far. In an active effort to disassociate the platform with Guttierrez's message, Twitch decided to remove the PogChamp emote (figure 16.5). Importantly, in their tweets, they acknowledge the importance of the emote to Twitch culture and its association with hype.

Following the removal of PogChamp by Twitch, FFZ also removed all emotes depicting Guttierrez except Pog, while BTTV has opted to keep these emotes in circulation. Part of Twitch's announcement of the removal of PogChamp included a commitment to "work with the community to design a new emote for the most hype moments on Twitch" (figure 16.5). This recognizes the void in Twitch vernacular left by the sudden removal of the emote. Rather than being immediately noticed, however, there was a ripple effect, as spectators attempted to use PogChamp in vain, informed each other of the removal and its reasoning, and formed opinions about whether it was the "right" thing to do or not.

Adjusting to this change presented challenges for previously PogChamp-heavy streams. Apart from managing the loss of a prominent part of their vernacular, these streamers also had to manage the grief of their stream collective. Some spectators responded with anger toward the platform or anger toward Guttierrez, while others had to come to terms with the fact that they had had no idea who Guttierrez was, and that there were people behind the faces that they had been using to express their emotions on Twitch. This last point often led to discussions of the LUL emote, as many users don't



**Figure 16.4**

Guttierrez's tweet inciting violence following the storming of the US Capitol.



**Figure 16.5**

A series of tweets from Twitch's official Twitter account announcing its justification of the removal of PogChamp.

realize that the emote's subject died of cancer in 2018. The general dynamics within streams and around PogChamp on Twitch echoed the arguments around the storming of the Capitol that were occurring off the platform, in the real world. In this way, not only was the removal of PogChamp in response to an event beyond the bounds of the platform, but it was also reflective of social and cultural arrangements off the platform. Bearing this in mind, streamers had to decide if and how to discuss the change—something that was particularly difficult for those who make a point of avoiding any sort of political or generally contentious subjects during their streams. The stream collective also needs to decide how it wants to move forward. Does it continue using the PogChamp variants on BTTV? Does it settle for Twitch's promise of an alternative? Does it find its own alternative?

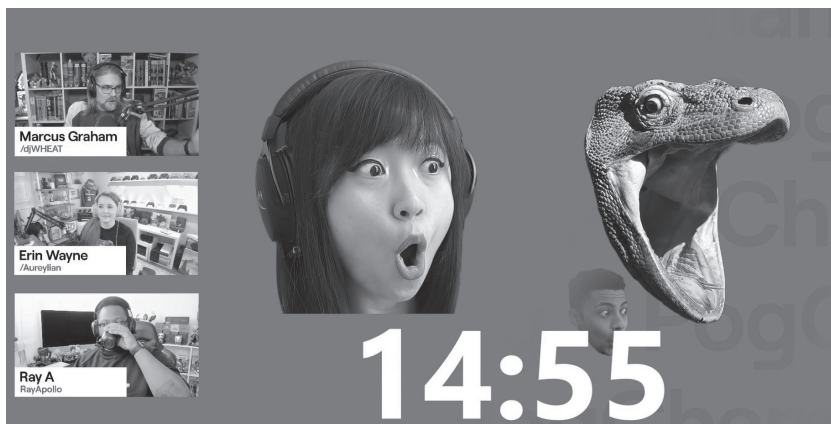
The seemingly simple case of PogChamp's "removal" presents a significant complication for live streaming practices on Twitch. While it isn't unusual for vernacular to change over time, this sudden endowment of additional meaning—the association with an explicit encouragement of violence—added new layers of meaning to Guttierrez's face in chats. Every time it appeared, questions of whether the user didn't know what had happened, or whether they knew and simply didn't care, arose. The newly entrenched politics of PogChamp demonstrates Twitch's place within broader cultural arrangements. And although this politics wouldn't change, another layer of complexity would be added when Twitch lived up to its promise to revive its expression of hype two days later.



### Whose Hype Is It Anyway?

Starting on January 8, 2021, PogChamp had a new face every twenty-four hours. The faces were primarily those of popular streamers, chosen to present the diverse range of Twitch users, including a range of gender and sexual identities, races, and geographical locations. What they held in common was the name “PogChamp” and the facial expression of each subject. Each day until January 19, Twitch promoted the PogChamp of the day on its Twitter account. On this day, Twitch tweeted a generic video flagging the rotating emote. From then on, PogChamp received less and less attention from Twitch until February 12, when the official Twitch channel hosted an event called The PogChampening. During this event, viewers voted for one of two choices for the next permanent PogChamp. The first choice was the most used creator PogChamp, which was the streamer UmiNoKaiju. The second choice was another emote that served as PogChamp on January 19, KomodoHype (figure 16.6), an image of a Komodo dragon with its mouth wide open. During the period of rotating PogChamps, KomodoHype became a community favorite expression of hype—so much so that it won the vote and became the next permanent PogChamp.

Hype is a popular internet affect, and the loss of PogChamp means that a new form of expression is required. Being a global emote—one of Twitch’s



**Figure 16.6**

The countdown for the vote between UmiNoKaiju and KomodoHype for the next permanent PogChamp during The PogChampening.

oldest emotes, in fact—PogChamp was used and recognized across the platform, and establishing a widespread alternative was unlikely to happen quickly, if at all. This may have been part of Twitch’s motivation when the decision was made to switch from entirely removing the emote to replacing the image. In this way, the association with Gutierrez’s comments and the raiding of the US Capitol was destabilized, but the vernacular tool still maintains much of its core. To conclude this chapter, I compare the intent with the execution and examine exactly how the final decision to change PogChamp plays into the broader culture of Twitch and relates to events and values beyond the platform.

When Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster (2019) examine the discriminatory rhetoric of “titty streamers,” they find that the pejorative term is employed by Reddit users to undermine the labor of women streamers. The term actively works to marginalize them and neglects the reality that “all live streaming is a kind of body work” (12), just valued differently depending on whose body is being seen and the nature of the work. When they discuss the language associated with sexual content in Twitch’s policy documents, Cullen and Ruberg (2019) similarly find that certain bodies are delegitimized, adding that “[b]ecause they inhabit bodies that others perceive as sexualized, women streamers are presumed to . . . represent rule violations waiting to happen” (7). This two-pronged attack on women streamers is especially important when considering emotes that represent these bodies, as it affects how users read and deploy those emotes, as discussed in relation to TriHard and cmonBruh. The idea of a daily PogChamp plays into this as well, as assumptions about others’ bodies are inherited by and enacted through emotes.

There has been (at least the appearance of) an effort to remedy issues of marginalization on Twitch. Twitch has highlighted multiple issues targeting and events celebrating its minority streamers, and in January 2021, the platform began to enforce its updated Hateful Conduct and Harassment Policy. The decision to highlight a diverse range of creators through daily PogChamps is both consistent with this and, in many ways, a step further due to the visibility of PogChamp within streams. By representing a body, emotes carry identity markers that frame how they are interpreted in streams. These markers reflect the identity of the streamer as an individual, so the daily PogChamp solution provided a new kind of representation and visibility to groups and streamers that may otherwise never receive

such attention on the platform. Unfortunately, as I previously mentioned, visibility—particularly in the form of emotes—is easily abused when the context is left in the hands of users who don't share the values of the creators.

Of course, this isn't the only issue with the solution that Twitch chose. By preserving the name of the emote and the facial expression, the daily PogChamps bolstered Gutierrez's presence on the platform. Each PogChamp became an intertext that referred back to the original emote and its variants—which were still in circulation thanks to BTTV. Further, the existence of the daily PogChamps led to other creators commissioning their own PogChamp subscriber emotes in the hopes that maybe one day they would be chosen as the daily PogChamp. Even if these were named differently, the combination of the facial expression and the existence of an increasing number of PogChamps made the references clear. The association between the emote and the values that the "removal" of the emote was intended to isolate were still present and strong. By changing the emote in this way instead of removing it entirely, Twitch arguably had not changed anything.

Also, for all of Twitch's clearly considered efforts to promote diversity and provide visibility to its marginalized creators, Twitch users voted for a lizard. Perhaps this is because marginalized creators felt that the representation was tokenistic and insufficient. Perhaps voting against a human replacement for Gutierrez and for an emote that already existed under another name was a mark of resistance to change or diversity. Perhaps KomodoHype had already taken the place of PogChamp for many users, so this vote was formalizing a decision that had already been made informally by users. Or perhaps Twitch users just like Komodo dragons. Amid all of this uncertainty, however, it is very clear that the final result was anticlimactic.

Despite this anticlimactic conclusion, the PogChamp revamp clearly demonstrates how live streaming culture does not operate in isolation on the platform, but rather reflects and responds to external occurrences and values. Further, this moment in live streaming history exemplifies how the values of participants in live streaming culture are made visible through the features of the platform and their evolution. While Twitch has the power to alter platform features to celebrate diversity among its users, those features will ultimately be employed by users to express their own values. Twitch has a responsibility to its user base to continue supporting its marginalized creators, but it also needs to account for the targeted harassment that accompanies visibility for many of those creators.

In this chapter, I've presented a marker of PogChamp's 2021 shift and its significance to the culture of Twitch, even as its impact fades. I have reflected upon the importance of emotes to the culture of the platform through PogChamp, and discussed how changing the emote affected user behavior and awareness of cultural issues external to Twitch. PogChamp's removal and subsequent change unpack some of the complexity of social and cultural arrangements surrounding emotes, enabling new insights into their functions. Better understanding of these arrangements opens the door for more nuanced examinations of the relationships between Twitch's corporate identity, user agency, and representation on the platform.

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# Real Life in Real Time

## Live Streaming Culture

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