

Impact of “Sense of Community” On Twitch Users and Live-Streams

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Abstract

The following research proposal examines how communities within streams on Twitch effects viewer tendencies and motivations. Using an online survey sent to 500 subscribers to top Fortnite channels and streams, the proposed research aims to discover how a sense of community in viewers impacts their overall viewing experience. In addition, the research examines how the use of the chat in the stream impacts there sense of community. The results of the survey and the study will benefit the insight on the live-streaming field, which is a new and fast-growing medium. The insights on how the community is impactful for the viewer will benefit current streamers and also advertisers looking to promote their product on Twitch.

Impact of “Sense of Community” On Twitch Users and Live-Streams

The introduction of live streaming technology has had immense effects on the media landscape and is continually becoming more popular. Almost every social media platform has live streaming capabilities and websites such as Twitch and Mixer are growing every day. Twitch, the most popular streaming site, reaches 15 million viewers every day in which 55% of them are between the ages of 18-34 (“25 Useful Twitch Statistics for Influencer Marketing Managers,” 2019). Within Twitch, the most popular category is gaming, where people watch streamers play their favorite games.

The reason for this enormous growth and influence is because, from both an audience and content creators’ perspective, live streaming allows for instant communication and real-time feeds. Viewers can directly speak to the streamer through the chat and can be responded to. In addition, the viewer can directly influence the events in the game or in the stream with their responses. Most importantly, communication in the live chat can create a sense of community between viewers. Many viewers watch the same streamer every day and become friends with others in chat through time. They begin to recognize each other more and more each day.

Using the Uses and Gratifications Theory as the lens in which viewers engage in a stream, this study aims to question the effect of these built communities and seeks to understand how much of an impact that the community makes on viewership.

Literature Review

Before beginning to contemplate and understand how the community portion of Twitch functions, research on how the platform functions as a whole and who are the types of viewers

must be done. A content analysis by Edge (2013) dived into this new medium of live-streaming and found that Twitch, specifically, draws in 34 million unique viewers a month due to its “easy to use platform” that provides fast and easy access. Diving further into this up-and-coming platform, Edge found that there are two types of content that are streamed: eSports and general gameplay. eSports consists of major competitive tournaments of popular games, while general gameplay normally consists of one or more streamers playing a game casually. Edge quickly goes into describing the history of Twitch and how it is the main platform for these two growing types of entertainment. Next, Edge goes into the four types of spectators that actively go onto Twitch: the inspired, the pupil, the entertained and the crowd (Edge 2013). The “inspired” watch streams of a game that they are eager to play. The watch to attempt new strategies employed by the streamer they are watching, who is often a professional player. The “pupil” watch streams to get an understanding of how the game is played and the “entertained” watch for entertainment purposes only. Lastly, the “crowd” watch because of the community ties that are associated with spectating. Similarly to watching a live sporting event, these spectators enjoy being there with others watching the excitement of a game.

Successful Streamer Tendencies

The following literature review grasps the tendencies that streamers use to retrain viewership. In a content analysis of 100 streamers by Sjöblom, Törhönen, Hamari and Macey (2019), the researchers found that the most successful tendencies by streamers are through social and revenue affordances. In terms of social tendencies, the most successful streamers augment their stream with a webcam of themselves and a high-quality mic, which allows for them to narrate their gameplay and talk to the viewers in the stream. In addition, the ability for the

streamer to talk with the chat with the mic, allows them to thank those who donate, voice their opinion and allows them to become a “micro-celebrity” for the stream. Secondly, the most successful streamers participate in revenue affordances, which includes both social revenue and commercial revenue. Streamers will show on the stream the viewer who has donated the most money or subscribed the longest (social revenue) and also will display any sponsorships or advertisements that they are connected with on their stream as well (commercial revenue).

Viewer Tendencies and Motivations

Wulf, Schneider and Beckert (2018) examined this question in their research and found that the factors of unpredictability, suspense and community building keep viewers watching. Specifically, after surveying over 500 participants, the study found that one of the key factors of entertainment was suspense and the unpredictability of a stream. Especially pertinent to this study, the authors found that the ability for Twitch to function as a social medium is entertaining for viewers. The way that Twitch gathers people with the same interests and offers the opportunity to communicate as peers, is a huge factor in entertainment and social benefits for consumers (2018).

Chat System

The main way that these viewers communicate in the community which is through the chat system. As long as the viewer has an account with Twitch, they are able to write messages in the chat option. However, depending on the preferences of the streamer, some chats may be put into subscriber-only mode and emote-only mode, which limits the ability for some viewers to communicate with others and the streamer. Additionally, depending on the size of the chat, the scrolling of the chat may be faster or slower. If there are more people in the stream, there will be

more people chatting and the faster the messages will appear and disappear, and vice versa for smaller streams. In a study done by Ford and Gardner (2017), the faster a chat is moving, the less coherent messages will be from viewers. The study found that massive chats have more short-handing, have less original content and have the same amount of unique voices. Overall, the study analyzes the way that these huge chats still maintain coherence even though the shorthand communication. Users in these chats tend to speak using shorter messages, emotes, and copying what others are saying to get their message across to the streamer. Similarly to the “wave” at sporting events, people in the chat work together to maintain coherence for the streamer and do so in smaller messages (Ford & Gardner 2017). In addition to shorthand, chats struggle with trolling, insults and profanity from viewers. The internet has always been a place where people feel comfortable typing insults and vulgar messages as they are not there in person, and Twitch is no stranger to this. In regards to this Seering, Kraut and Dabbish (2017) acknowledged that imitation between viewers can become a problem in terms of negativity. If one viewer sees a negative comment, then they are more likely to post one themselves. However, to combat against this, Twitch chats employs chat moderation through the use of mods and through the use of bans. Overall, the study found that successful use of bans and chat moderation has led to shaping pro-social behavior within chat rooms and streams.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

To measure the community aspect of Twitch, the study will be based off of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974). The theory argues that people consume media to satisfy their own specific needs. In this light, media is often consumed over other types of media in order to attend to these personal needs. This also makes media a

participatory act by consumers. The use of this theory has been applied to live-streaming and Twitch before, especially to discover the motivations for Twitch viewers. Using the uses and gratifications theory as a framework, Sjöbolm and Hamari (2017) examined the relationship between the five categories (cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative and tension release) and the hours and streamers watched, total subscriptions and streamers followed. Overall, the study found that all five motivation categories were associated with the main outcome variables. In addition, the only gratification that seems to explain subscription behavior is social integrative motivation.

Further research has been done to relate Twitch consumption using a dual identification framework. A study done by Hu, Zhang and Wang (2017) found that there were two different thoughts on why audiences continue to watch. First, the study broke down broadcaster identification. Spectators tend to continue their interaction and viewership, when they believe when they identify with the streamer. This means that if streamers believe what they believe, act how they act and think how they think, then they will continuously tune in. In addition, parasocial relationships are formed from recognition from the streamer. On the other side, the study also examined group identification as a means to retain viewership. The study found that viewers are more likely to keep watching if they are satisfied in three dimensions: participation, cognitive communion and resonant contagion. In essence, if viewers can participate and interact in chat, think similarly to other people in chat and the ability to influence and be influenced by others in the stream, then they are more likely to continually watch the streamer.

However, the study that is the basis of this research is a study by Bruce-Hilvert and Neill (2018) used the UGT as a framework for how consumers choose media and their roles within it,

in regards to streaming, Building on top of the UGT, the researchers created eight socio-motivations for live-stream engagement: social interaction, sense of community, meeting new people, entertainment, information seeking, external support, emotional connectedness, social support and social anxiety (Bruce-Hilvert & Neill, 2018). These motivations were then measured and compared with four factors of live-stream engagement: emotional connectedness, time spent, time subscribed and donations. The results were that six of the eight motivators significantly linked to one of the live-stream engagement factors. Each factor is explained in detail, but particularly interesting is that subscriptions and donations were made by desire for social interaction and a sense of community. In addition, people in smaller communities were more likely to be socially-engaged.

Hypothesis

The following study expands on the “sense of community” motivation in the uses and gratifications theory and focuses on how community aspects are influential in the decision to continuously view Twitch streams. The following hypotheses are analyzed in the following survey:

H1: Male viewers will feel a greater sense of community.

H2: Younger viewers will feel a greater sense of community

H3: Viewers who spend more time watching streams will feel a greater sense of community.

H4: Viewers who are subscribed to more Twitch streamers will feel more included in the community.

H5: Viewers who spend more money on the stream (i.e. donations, subscriptions, bits) feel a greater sense of community.

H6: Viewers who sent more messages in the chat feel more a part of the community.

Methods

In order to examine the stated hypotheses, the proposed study will gather information on how a viewer develops a sense of community (i.e chat) and what kind of viewers tend to feel this sense of community more than others. The study will use an online and cross-sectional survey sent to Twitch viewers which will test their own Twitch usage and sense of community that they feel.

Participants

To narrow the scope of the study, the sample for the study will be Twitch users who watch the game Fortnite. To sample the general population, 500 subscribers of the top Fortnite channels will be selected to take the survey.

Procedures

With the survey being conducted online, the proposed survey will take place remotely for each Twitch user. Users will be sent a link to the survey over email, which will then give instructions on how to take the survey and then the participants will be asked for consent.

Measures

Demographics

Two variables being measured in this study are the age and the gender of the viewers. To measure the demographic information, participants will be asked for their age and their preferred gender.

Twitch Usage and Interaction

The study will also measure the amount that each user interacts and uses Twitch. To measure this, participants will be asked:

- How many hours a week do you spend on Twitch?
- How long have you watched the streamer [Tfue, innocents, etc.]?
- Do you donate to the channel?
 - If yes, how much/often and for what purpose?
- Do you participate in chat?
 - If yes, how often?
 - If no, why do you not?
- How many streamers do you watch regularly?
- How many subscriptions do you have?

Sense of Community

The variable being studied in this online survey is the sense of community. This variable will be measured by using the sense of community scale and its four dimensions (Peterson, Speer & McMillan, 2008). This scale will be adapted to fit in the current study and will use eight Likert scale model prompts to measure the sense of community in the participants. The prompts are as follows:

- I can get what I need in this stream / channel

- This stream / channel helps me fulfill my needs
- I feel like a member of this stream
- I belong in the stream
- I have a say about what goes on in my stream
- People in this stream are good at influencing each other
- I feel connected to this stream
- I have a good bond with others in the stream

Results

After collecting all of the data, I would first begin to clean and organize the data. With the survey being conducted online, I would begin to eliminate any missing data that may be present. Once done, I will then begin to create averages and summations for each participant, especially for their sense of community.

If I had these averages, I would begin to describe the demographics of users and the usage of Twitch. Evaluating who exactly these viewers are and how much they use the site could be very telling on what type of audience tunes into streams. Additionally, discussing the amount that each respondent participated in the chat would be important in showcasing the importance of that feature.

After describing these findings, I would then explore and test each hypothesis set out in the survey. To test whether or not male viewers feel a greater sense of community (H1), I would use a point-biserial correlation. I would predict that this would be apparent and that male viewers would feel more welcomed in the community.

For the rest of the hypotheses, the correlation between the variables would be tested using a Pearson correlation. I would predict that all of the hypotheses would have a positive correlation after running this test and would all lead to a greater sense of community.

Discussion

The proposed experiment would shine some valuable insight into how Twitch engages their audience and how the sense of community plays a part of this engagement. However, while the study has many positive implications, the limitations of the study must be addressed as well.

Limitations

One limitation of the study is the lack of accountability associated with an online survey. Without direct facilitation by researchers, respondents had the opportunity to blindly select answers to the survey or complete it as fast as they could, which could result in a lack of validity in some answers.

Another limitation of the study would be that surveys do not develop cause and effect. I can not assume that there is a relationship between the variables in the hypotheses

Lastly, a limitation is that the sample participants were only selected for their viewership of the game Fortnite. While Fortnite may be one of the most popular games on the site, it is not the only one. In fact, Twitch has thousands of other games being played and even has real-life streams as well. Communities and streamers culture change from game to game, and from stream to stream. By only using Fortnite, the sense of community on Twitch may not be entirely represented. Future research on this topic can analyze other games within Twitch to see if there are differences between various games.

Implications

While there are implications to the research, there are also many implications within the study for the future of Twitch and live-streaming. While there has been various research on the reasons and motivations for why people consume Twitch, there has been no direct studies on the community aspect of live-streams. This study provides crucial insight into how this particular aspect motivates viewers and how it is an integral part of the successful growth of live-streaming.

Furthermore, this research on how the “sense of community” for viewers is important information for both streamers and advertisers. This information can help streamers begin to understand the value of providing a relatable and safe community, and how that impacts their total number of returning viewers, donations and subscriptions. Additionally, many advertisers are already starting to partner with live-streamers and knowledge on the impact of community is crucial in getting their product. If advertisers recognize the importance of the community and the impact it has, they can begin to target their campaigns to specific streams that share the same values.

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