

Social Media, Communities, and Networks – Curtin
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Thesis: Live-streaming: The Real-Time Crowd Community Social Media

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Abstract

This paper explores live-streaming with a focus on Youtube and Twitch. It shows some of the societal issues surrounding the act of live-streaming, touching upon the fear of missing out, how digital social presence varies between live-streaming and other forms of social media, and how platforms take advantage of the limits of personal social interaction during live-streaming for financial benefit, making comparisons with the findings of other researchers to show how live-streaming can be addictive and predatory in a way unique to itself.

Introduction

Live-streaming, the social media sub-type that pairs online video streaming with a live host or hosts (a streamer), is currently a major form of social media, with Twitch.tv boasting 1 trillion minutes watched in 2020 (Twitch Interactive Inc., 2021a). Youtube offers both this and non-live media streaming, but it's statistics are unclear about how these two services compare to one another. Alternative streaming services are also acknowledged, but not relevant to this paper. The real time nature of live-streams creates a limited period of time in which the media can be interacted with meaningfully, with the ideal outcome of being noticed and responded to by the personality hosting the live-stream, affecting the media in a way that is both measurable and permanent. Standing in the way of this is the common method of interaction in live-streams, that being the real-time text chat log. The chat log displays short messages from viewers to both the viewers and the streamer themselves, and serves as the primary method of interaction between viewership and streamer.

It is my intention to show that participating in live-streams during the live period is desirable, and also how the desirable outcome of participation is acted against by the act of participation, using established material to justify these points.

How Live-streaming Affects Viewers

The defining element of social interaction present in live-streams and other live-media that is not easily replicated by other forms is the strength of its digital social presence. Digital social presence is defined by Gundawardena (1995, as cited in Diwanji et al., 2020) as “the extent to which the other person is perceived as a ‘real being’ within a computer-mediated environment”, whereas Ijsselsteijn et al. (2000, as cited in Diwanji et al., 2020) defined it more as a feeling of “being together”, or togetherness. In most forms of social media, this digital social presence is limited by the use of recorded video, or written text messages, occurring asynchronously. O’Donnell (1974) provides evidence that a person’s writing is typically significantly distinct from their spoken language, giving cause to believe that written social media may come off as less realistic, and more scripted, even when a post may be entirely off-the-cuff, especially when the viewer is familiar with their speech. Live-streaming offers a more synchronous experience, with a clear audio-visual interaction with the streamer, allowing complex body language and social clues to come through. While this may suffer from technical limitations (bandwidth, processing speed), this provides complex near-real-time interactions with what is readily perceived as a human, building a psychological connection between the streamer, as well as other commentators (Diwanji et al., 2020) in a way that other social media platforms may have difficulty achieving.

In terms of social interaction, live-streams are inherently short-lived. A professional streamer will typically declare the stream’s start time beforehand through some social media interaction (@moricalliope, 2021), and must end at some point, with the content of the stream reliably being unique due to being a live performance. JWTIntelligence (2012) defined the fear of missing out (FOMO) as the “uneasy and sometimes all-consuming feeling that you’re missing out-that your peers are doing, in the know about, or in possession of more or something better than you”. It is then easy to follow with the assumption that people who are part of a social group invested in a live-stream host would feel a strong sense of FOMO due to the foreknowledge of the event taking place. This should then greatly drive engagement more than other types of social media.

Combining these two ideas together, we have reason to believe that live-streaming provides a more convincing and engaging social interaction than other digital media, as well as possessing a strong FOMO effect, creating a comparatively strong emotional impetus for engagement. It is important to be aware of this as

FOMO has been determined to be a significant risk factor in Social Media Addiction. (Blackwell, et al., 2017)

How Viewers Affect the Streamer and Themselves

In popular live-streaming, the viewer is commonly granted access to a chat window. A single frame containing the most recent comments, with a text box to add the viewers on. This interaction with the streamer is an evolution of the audience participation programs of the past, such as live audiences and phone-in opportunities, and brings it's own positives and negatives. The chat is restricted to sentences of text and ideograms (emotes). As the chat window is limited in size, new messages remove old ones from view. This creates an inverse relationship between audience and stream – the audience increases out of a desire to engage with the streamer, and to express emotions in the moment (applause, encouragement, anger), but increases in the audience's size sabotage the ability to make nuanced interactions.

This interaction can be likened to real world crowds. As the size of the crowd increases, the ability for members within the crowd to express themselves meaningfully, outside of the simple group consensus, is highly restricted. Where the real world case may give way to the loudest voices taking control of the conversation, in the digital space this can only be achieved by repetition of the message. However, it is possible to restrict repeated message spamming in Twitch (Twitch Interactive Inc., 2021b) and Youtube (Google, 2021) placing further focus on group consensus.

Live-streaming may be more readily applicable to traditional crowd psychology, however the restricted interaction between viewers in the immediate moment shows value in connecting the concept to existing online crowd theory. Most research on online crowds tends towards being focused on real-world action, and asynchronous social media of Twitter's sort, Stage (2013), focused on the effects seen in blogging, claimed "online crowding' refers to the affective unification and relative synchronisation of a public in relation to a specific online site" (p. 216). This quote is quite applicable to the current topic, as we can approximate the requirements. The online site is the live-stream, the relative synchronisation is a result of the time frame being real-world, and the affective unification can be achieved through emotional response to stimuli. Stage (2013) engages with LeBon ([1895] 2002, as cited in Stage, 2013) who's description of crowds is primarily as de-individualised people, which connects well with how the live-stream crowd seemingly behaves.

In contrast to that statement, LeBon's views on crowds may not connect well with the behaviour of the physically isolated individuals that make up the crowd, and

I must acknowledge that this is a subject that requires more research, a perspective acknowledged by various researchers, who also focused on asynchronous social media. (Freelon et al., 2018; Lin, 2015)

Regardless of the aforementioned complexity, this behaviour has already been identified and monetised, enabling users to purchase special messages to make their specific individuality stand out, as Twitch Bits, and Youtube Super Chats. Youtube recommends reminding the audience about Super Chats at the beginning of streams, and to reward this behaviour by acknowledging each donation. (Youtube Creators, 2020, 3:17) Considering Social Identity Theory (McLeod, 2019), it is plausible, even likely, that this an attempt to normalise monetary donations as standard practice for viewers.

Limitations and Alternatives

This essay has focused on how users interact socially with live-streams while live, but this is admittedly not the only available method. There are three to four alternative ways to interact, which allow users to engage with content in a fulfilling way without being bound to strict time and date requirements. Youtube live-streams, after their conclusion, feature both playback of the text chat during video replay, as well as comments that can be left by later viewers, allowing the content to be interacted with as per “normal” for Youtube. It is also common for fans to create secondary social media collectives, such as subreddits focused on live-stream personalities. Finally, the uploading of specific segments of streams by third parties, and a personality’s edited and streamlined versions of their own content, create easily consumed, time-efficient content that still permits users to absorb the media and engage in post-stream social interaction.

This availability of media may heavily mitigate the impact of FOMO. Because the entertainment value of the media is not limited, much less emphasis may be placed on the need to engage with the media in real time, though this is far from saying that it is not significant. Live performances are still commonplace in a healthy society, despite the immense effort that goes into media recordings. What still possesses value in this situation is the novelty of perceiving oneself as being in state of digital co-presence with the personality.

These “secondary” sources of engagement can also be used to promote the personality’s products and media first-hand, providing the necessary motivation to engage with the material on release in the first place. In this case, the fear of missing out would be caused by an interest in digital co-presence inspired by the recordings, and not limitations on the media itself.

Conclusion

This paper finds its limitations in considering the sheer scope of the modern streamer's social media networks in sufficient detail, as these networks incorporate multiple different social media sites, styles of media production, and variety of ways to engage audiences, both directly and indirectly.

Live-streaming shows itself as a powerful, but inflexible form of social media, creating strong ties between the crowd and the streamer. The amount of research done in the field of entirely online crowds seems very limited, and we identify this as an interesting avenue of research in the future. In contrast, live-streaming companies have quickly learned how to make use of this form of social media for their own benefit, and those ideas have spread to streamers. In conclusion, streaming is advanced and well-established and we recommend caution be advised for those vulnerable to the benefits and feeling of belonging of this form of social media, more so than that of less visibly monetised forms.

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