

Clarissee de Jesus

The Rise of Live Streaming: Exploring the Ways in Which
We Cultivate Relationships Online vs. Offline

Faculty Sponsor

Dr. Lori Stallings

Abstract

Previous research has studied parasocial relationships with television bonds and how this one-sided relationship affects the users. This study examines how these bonds translate to the rise of live-streaming— specifically on the Twitch platform. Moreover, it explores the bonds made from user to user as well as from user to streamer. This study seeks to look into how bonds are created online versus offline and how they could be intertwined. By using the parasocial relationship theory paired with the idea of relationship maintenance, the research indicated trends in how users created and maintained a relationship as well as how men and women used the platform. The consensus was that users felt that using Twitch strengthened their relationships offline but did not help create relationships online.

Introduction

A study conducted at the University of Washington studied gaming effects in conjunction with burn patients at the Harborview Burn Center. The goal was to examine how a virtual game can combat pain. Researchers gave these patients an interactive snowball fight game called Snow World. After playing, patients reported feeling so immersed in the game that their pain decreased by 30% to 50%. The fascination with gameplay and its impact on lives has spiraled into this research. This study seeks to look at how gameplay can positively impact someone's life. Looking into how playing games can potentially change people. That is where live-streaming and the Twitch platform comes into play. This study is conducted around this platform since it has been noted as one of the leading broadcasting platforms within the last five years according to Twitch metrics. It has garnered so much attention due to its interaction and engagement as well as its accessibility and diversity. When looking on the website, you see that gameplay is really only half of its content. A large portion of the streams people flock to are not related to gaming, but activities such as cooking, drawing, and vlogging. According to a study done at the University of Florida, the platform reaches up to 15 million viewers per day so its users can interact on different chats and connect with people in real-time.

It is important to study gaming and the impacts that it has on people as the industry has expanded so much in the last 20 years; online gaming and the community surrounding video games have become massive markets. The evolution of gaming has spawned from DVDs and consoles to having games directly on one's phone. Accessibility is one unique feature that revolutionized the market. The video game industry is increasing every year with reports explaining that by 2025 it could become a 300 billion dollar market (Koksal, 2019). With the increase of money to be made and the expansion of the community, online video games have become a large part of people's everyday lives (especially young people). Not only are more people playing video games than ever before, but more people are also watching them on online streaming platforms such as Twitch and Mixer. They have developed and created dedicated fan bases for the popular celebrity-type figures using the platforms. These different forms of social interaction have led many college-aged individuals to go online to form friendships and engage with people in the online world as opposed to the offline world. This study seeks to find the connection between time spent forming relationships in the online world and the effects this has on social interaction in the offline world. By examining ways in which people interact within the video game community, the study sheds light on the positive and negative effects coming from different forms of online social interaction.

There are three important conceptual definitions related to the study that provide a more detailed understanding of the relationships within the online community. Online Streaming Platforms (OSP), as mentioned earlier, include such sites as Twitch, Mixer, and YouTube. These sites have features that differentiate them from each other but provide a common theme. There is a way for content creators to live-stream their videos to an audience. Along with the ability to live-stream their content, the sites provide a chat feature for audience members to engage in the content as it is going on and to have discussions with other members of the audience or ask direct questions to the content creator as well. Oftentimes, there are avenues for audience members to send money to content creators as a way of getting more attention drawn to themselves. Parasocial relationships pertain to the relationships formed between content creators and audience members. A parasocial relationship is one in which one party involved extends more emotional energy and effort than the other and has more commitment to the relationship. In the case of the content creator and audience member relationship, there is disproportionate participation on the side of the audience member as they know more about the person streaming. The last concept deals with relationship maintenance, this deals with actions and behaviors one does to keep the relationships they currently have. This is important because this study will delve into the mechanics that go into how users keep relationships and how they are trying to create relationships, whether it be online or offline.

Literature Review

Since the live-streaming community and industry are relatively new, much of the research conducted has only spanned the last ten years. For this reason, the literature review is taking a thematic approach to the organization of research. The major themes have been divided into parasocial relationships, relationship maintenance, and the social aspect of gaming. The topic of video games relates to one's ability to communicate on and offline. It will also look at gamers' parasocial relationships that are cultivated when watching live-streams and the data covered on how it might alter their attributes and in turn affect their relationships.

Themes With Connecting Online

Gaming and online social connections lead to an easy transition between purely online social relationships and offline relationships. This can be seen in the social aspect of video games in general and how playing video games can be a social activity (Consalvo 2017). The researchers found that even single-player video games can provide a social experience. This quasi-social

activity is important to the study since it occurs regardless of whether users view themselves as part of the gaming community or not. By playing video games, the player benefits from the perceived social interaction. A similar study conducted by Stone (2019), delves into the gamer identity and the attributes attached to someone who identifies as a gamer. Stone found it was more likely for someone to self-identify as a gamer if they had a larger friend group who played games as well. Stone also found that as the years progress the term ‘gamer’ is becoming less negative and holding more positive connotations, possibly a result of the growing gaming culture which is becoming more widespread and more common. This study also points to the fact that gaming can very well be a strong bonding element among friend groups offline as well. Another study conducted by Diwanji et al. (2020) looks at how behavior is affected by the use of Twitch; this study will examine behavioral factors from a communicative point of view.

Gaps in Literature/ Themes of Negative Impacts

The act of gaming has become a form of escape that gamers are turning to and creating a shift in how they relate to others offline. This current study fills in gaps within this research project that do not identify what seems to be missing from online relationships but exists more in their offline relationships. Another study by Pietersen et al. (2018) follows this up and supports it with a similar conclusion. It states that many of the participants in the study reported that they felt their online connections were important to them and a great way to socialize, however, to create stronger bonds they preferred offline face to face interaction. This could indicate that while online social interaction is helpful and a good way for many to stay connected, it can be used as a temporary replacement but not a full substitute for offline interactions. Again, the gap in the study by Pietersen et al. (2018) of why people feel their offline bonds are stronger is a topic that this current study will seek to fill in. Legkauskas & Gintarė (2018) reported that there is a difference in how genders engage in relationship maintenance and how that can translate to this research on live-streaming.

There is increasing importance to determine the positive benefits that can be found from online gaming. A different study by Lobel et al. (2017) seemed to find a connection to depression and anxiety in children who played video games excessively. This is important to this current study being done since there is a balance between spending time online being positive and spending online having negative impacts on an individual. Another research study by Chen & Chang (2019) came to a similar conclusion, and found that excessive gaming with university students could lead to bad coping mechanisms and possible negative attributes. This seems to imply that gaming

can cause detriments to offline relationships. The intended focus of the study is college-aged adults; it is important to note that excessive gaming during early development is linked to negative attributes. Tian et al. (2020) showed that the impacts that video games and their effects on the individual can lead to changes in social online bonds. This study observed college-aged students and the changes in their behavior based on the game they were playing and the effects on their interactions. The study shows how offline attributes like shyness shifted. They were more likely to be aggressive during game play. Chen & Chang (2019) take a similar approach of connecting the offline and online world, and whether these attributes that happen online are likely to transition offline as well.

Livestreaming

Livestreaming has become a way for parasocial relationships to be formed and that applies to the impact of a gamer's offline engagement. Parallels between television personalities and live-streaming can be drawn in the similar parasocial bond that is formed with the audiences and the personalities. For this reason, Jahng (2019) looked at a similar discourse that examined the connection between reality television stars and the cultivation effect the shows have. The research observed that the more reality television one watched the more likely one was to engage on social media and to extend participation outside of simply watching. This research examines whether or not parasocial connections online can bring lasting impacts on social interactions in the offline world. Research done by Lim et al. (2020) looks into viewers' wishful identification of the streaming personalities that they are watching. This research focuses on live streams and parasocial relationships. It shows that audience members watching have a desire to have some of the traits of the people that they watch often; traits that could be learned and that could bleed over into their offline relationships. A study by Chen & Chang (2019) looks at the reasons why people find themselves watching and engaging in these streams and the viewers' potential benefits and potential downfalls of participating. In the study, Chen & Chang found a direct correlation with loneliness and the need for escapism in the Twitch viewers that they surveyed. The final study, done by Woodcock (2019), examines the media personalities themselves and specifically studies Twitch streamers and their abilities to be social media influencers. The study talks about how streamers are in a good position to influence people and get business benefits.

Research Question

Previous literature about this topic has shown the rise of live-streaming and how it impacted society within the past five years. Delving into this topic, the previous literature questions how watching live-streams can be pivotal in influencing and communicating with others. It also investigates the variables that can lead one to connect or reach out online and offline. Therefore, the following research question poses the idea of how live-streaming can impact the way users communicate with each other online and how that can bleed into their offline bonds.

RQ: Do participants on Twitch feel the community within the platform has made it easier to connect with others offline?

Methods

The approach in this study was to employ a qualitative content analysis. Ten college-students were recruited (six men and four women) using snowball sampling. This study conducted a semi-structured interview via Zoom. Participants were asked 15 questions that were a mix of open-ended and straightforward questions to gather the general Twitch experience and understand what attracted participants to the platform. The response to the questions determined the course of the interview. After conducting the interviews, it was decided that thematic-coding would be the best course of action. By using this method, the data interpreted how gamers view their gaming experience and interactions with others to look at trends and similarities of shared experiences or differences. The limited number of responses is a possible short-coming in the study, which can be expanded in a future study.

Theory

The theoretical framework that this study based its research on is the theory of parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationship theory created by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956 examines the bonds formed with media personalities and viewers despite never meeting (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Horton and Wohl analyzed this phenomenon with mass media consumers and media persons such as television or radio stars. However, it is noted that this phenomenon coined by Horton and Wohl existed before their study and could be seen with religious figures or politicians. They reported that the majority who experience this theory merely use parasocial relationships as a secondary type of social interaction and not a full replacement. A small circle of people replace social interaction with parasocial relationships. The

theory was expanded in 1989 by Elizabeth Perse and Rebecca Rubin when they challenged Horton and Wohl by claiming parasocial relationships are a natural occurrence and bound to happen when users spend time with these media personalities. They based their research on television personalities. Their study is the most often referenced and supported to base other research on. However, this theory has expanded to fit the new age of media with social media influencers on platforms like Instagram and YouTube.

This study also looks into the social aspect of gaming—how people perceive gaming as social interaction and how it affects users. Because live gameplay is in its infancy, this study aids our understanding of how users connect with Twitch as a social space. Lastly, this study explores relationship maintenance with broadcasting platforms. Though many regard Twitch as a social media platform, its end goal is being a livestreaming website. This study delves into how the difference is from user to user.

Results

By using thematic-coding, I found trends in the ways users maintained relationships, created relationships, and the different ways men and women used Twitch. The first trend in how users maintain relationships deals with how one might try to keep relationships. These could be actions or behaviors that show how it is not a one-sided relationship. For example, a person reaching out or communicating to show that they care. The next trend goes into creating relationships, examining how users create relationships online or offline. There is an emphasis on how users are choosing to build a connection with others. The last trend is the difference between men using Twitch versus women. It is interesting to note the specifics in how different sexes use Twitch and how that can contribute to their choices with building connections.

Maintaining Relationships

The findings show that overall, users said that using Twitch does not help them form bonds online but strengthens the bonds that they have already made. It meant that they were less inclined to find relationships on sites like Twitch, but users were more likely to talk about their usage of the platform with people they already know.

There were also trends in their Twitch usage. Twitch usage spiked because of COVID, so they were spending more hours on the platform than they usually do. In turn, they were reaching out to their friends more and more and likely to engage in relationship maintenance because of the pandemic. Many participants expressed that they felt their bonds strength-

ened during the quarantine. They used the platform as social interaction. Since fewer people were going out, they spent time with friends and caught up by playing and watching games together. This aligned with the idea of relationship maintenance since they were going out of their way to keep relationships around them during a time where in-person social interaction was limited.

The last part of this trend is that using Twitch has become intertwined with the participants' lives. Users felt a sense of necessity to catch up on the platform. Three users used the phrase "routine" to describe how they used Twitch every day during the pandemic and felt a bond grow between themselves and streamers. In turn, they felt that by watching their streamer, they were catching up with a friend and practicing relationship maintenance. Two users felt comfortable enough to say that they were friends with streamers even though they had never met the streamer before. This information also exhibits tendencies of parasocial relationships since users created a one-sided connection that translated into their everyday lives.

Creating Relationships

The next trend deals with creating relationships-whether online or offline. On Twitch the streams are accompanied by a live chat where users have their messages scroll vertically as more messages are sent. A majority of the participants felt like the Twitch chat was moving too fast to get a chance to have their messages actually read. The speed at which the chat moves corresponds directly to the number of viewers and the number of messages being sent. One user told me that it was "useless to use the chat with big streamers" since the messages could be hard to read and often missed, so they did not see the point of using that function. Another user said that they have always wanted to use the chat option but they were too shy.

This lack of participation feeds into how they are less likely to form bonds through the platform due to the fact that they feel detached from other users. Touching on the aforementioned fact that there could be up to 100,000 users on one single streamer's page, they felt they could not form a personal bond with other users. This trend is different from relatively smaller streamers since the engagement is lower resulting in a slower moving chat more conducive to participation. In these instances, users felt as if they could use the chat to engage with other users and the streamers. But, full-fledged relationships never emerged in either the case of small or large streamers. They were not as interested in forming a relationship online versus building them offline.

On the other side, there was a trend in how participants used their

interest in Twitch to form a bond offline. Face-to-face users felt confident enough to talk about their Twitch usage to people they just met. They are using their shared experience with the platform as an ‘ice breaker’ to talk about similarities and find common ground. Users’ shared experience is used to branch out to other topics and be able to form deeper connections.

Men on Twitch

This study observed that men were less likely to practice relationship maintenance offline as opposed to online with regard to Twitch. This trend is due to their belief that gaming is popular among men, so there is no stigma attached to being a part of the gaming community. One participant expressed that “gaming is popular among men so it’s embedded within our identity.” They felt as if they could share their hobby with other users online. Men expressed in the interviews a majority of their friendships have been built from the activities they shared and that gaming was an activity they often had in common. One participant stated that “during the quarantine, playing games and going on Twitch was a go-to passtime.” Since most of these friendships are activity based, once the activities were not available face-to-face, they were less likely to continue the said friendship. The relationships they built were not built on an emotional connection and did not go beyond casual friendships. The male participants were more likely to seek out friendships online since they go on similar websites like Twitch to build friendships around a shared hobby. They reported their Twitch usage sky-rocketed during the COVID-19 quarantine. One participant even claimed that they felt that their “bonds were stronger than ever during quarantine”. This indicated that they were more likely to engage in the chat than just being watchers. Their increased participation could be attributed to them feeling more comfortable expressing themselves online versus in real life. Four out of the six men interviewed mentioned words like “shy” or “uncomfortable” when asked if they felt they could express themselves offline more. The anonymity could play a major role in them feeling comfortable enough to come out of their shell. This may be heightened by the fact that Twitch users are not required to use real names or divulge private information.

Women on Twitch

Women using Twitch exhibited opposite attitudes. Women were more likely to practice relationship maintenance with those they knew online as opposed to offline. They were more inclined to strengthen the bonds that they already had rather than trying to create new ones. Because of this, during the period of isolation due to COVID-19, they were the ones more likely to reach out to their friends to watch streams or play games.

This difference in usage could be because they were more likely to be Twitch watchers rather than trying to be interactive. One participant claimed that they felt “more comfortable spending time with friends they’ve already made.” Other women participants expressed this same issue. That is why they were less likely to seek friendships online because they felt as if they could not express themselves the same way they did in real life. One participant in this study revealed that her friendships were not limited to specific activities, stating that “friendships do not have to be activity based”. Participants were more inclined to create a deep emotional bond and pass the boundary of casual relationships. All the women interviewed indicated the issue surrounding Twitch’s demographic. Men dominate the platform and the women feel intimidated and judged when they try to use the chat. They felt safer and more at with others offline rather than online.

Conclusion

Overall, it was found that Twitch does not make it easy to connect with others online, but it does help strengthen the existing bonds. This study sought to investigate the similarities between connecting with others by using the Twitch chat and connecting with others offline. Similarities were not shown in this data because the site can have up to 100,000 users using the chat with a fast rate of posts. As a result, most people cannot effectively have meaningful conversations as the messages are too fast and too plentiful. They feel like small fish in a big pond. It is important to note parasocial relationships were less likely from user to user but were likely from user to the streamer. This aligns with the current theory of parasocial relationships and their effect with media personalities. For future research, this study could be conducted in a post-COVID setting since participants’ levels of Twitch usage spiked during the period of isolation. The findings of this research were skewed because of the increased usage, so it would be beneficial to see how much the data would change if usage went back to pre-COVID levels. It would also be helpful to expand the participant sample from 10 to 30. Expanding the data to different age groups could potentially change the data in a positive way. A future study could expand research to varying ages and also socioeconomic demographics. Seeing if relationships were different if someone uses Twitch every single day, if they donate to specific streamers frequently, or if they participate in smaller streams where the ability to communicate in the chat would be easier. However, there has not been existing research with the idea of relationship maintenance and live-streaming. Lastly, future research could explore how relationship maintenance translates to users live-stream usage.

Appedix

Interview Questions:

1. How often do you game? How often do you go on Twitch? Are there any other websites you go to like Twitch?
2. When you say “live-streaming” what does that mean for you?
3. When you say “gaming” what does that mean for you?
4. Can you walk me through how you use the platform?
5. Who are your favorite streamers to watch. Why?
6. If you don’t have any favorite streamers, what attracts to watching a certain stream?
7. Do you feel as if the platform has made it easier to connect with others? Why or why not (If why, can you give an example story?)
8. Do you think you spend more time on Twitch than spending time with friends? (this includes texting or talking)
9. Have you made any friends from Twitch?
10. In what ways do you think you can connect more with others on Twitch? Opposite of that, in what ways do you think you connect less with others on Twitch?

References

- Chen, C.-Y., & Chang, S.-L. (2019). Moderating effects of information-oriented versus escapism-oriented motivations on the relationship between psychological well-being and problematic use of video game live-streaming services. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 3, 564.
- Consalvo, M. (2017) Player one, playing with others virtually: What's next in game and player studies. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34(1), 84–87.
- Diwanji, V., Reed, A., Ferhcaud, A., Seibert, J., Weinbrecht, V., Sellers, N., (2020). Don't just watch, join in: Exploring information behavior and co-presence on Twitch. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 105, 106-221.
- Horton, D., and Wohl, R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry* 19(3), 215-229.
- Jahng, M. R, ed. (2019). Watching the rich and famous: The cultivation effect of reality television shows and the mediating role of parasocial experiences. *Media Practice & Education*, 20(4), 319–333.
- Koksal, I. (2019, November 12). Video gaming industry & its revenue shift. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ilkerkoksal/2019/11/08/video-gaming-industry--its-revenue-shift/#-9499d3a663e5>.
- Legkauskas, V., Gintarė P. (2018) Gender differences in relationship maintenance behaviors and relationship satisfaction. *Social Welfare Interdisciplinary Approach*, 8(2), 30–39.
- Lim, J. S., Choe, M.-J., Zhang, J., & Noh, G.-Y. (2020). The role of wishful identification, emotional engagement, and parasocial relationships in repeated viewing of live-streaming games: A social cognitive theory perspective. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 108.
- Lobel, A., Engels, R., Stone, L., Burk, W., & Granic, I. (2017). Video gaming and children's psychosocial wellbeing: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 46(4), 884–897.
- Perse, E., Rubin, R. (1989). Attribution in social and parasocial relationships. *Communication Research*. 16(1), 59-77.

- Pietersen, A. J., Coetze, J. K., Byczkowska-Owczarek, D., Elliker, F., & Ackermann, L. (2018). Online gamers, lived experiences, and sense of belonging: Students at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 14(4), 122–137.
- Stone, J. A. (2019). Self-identification as a “gamer” among college students: Influencing factors and perceived characteristics. *New Media & Society*, 21(11–12), 2607–2627.
- Tian, Y., Gao, M., Wang, P., & Gao, F. (2020). The effects of violent video games and shyness on individuals’ aggressive behaviors. *Aggressive Behavior*, 1, 16.
- Woodcock, J., & Johnson, M. R. (2019). Live streamers on Twitch.tv as social media influencers: Chances and challenges for strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(4), 321–335.