

The interaction of discourse and acts: Spectating grassroot live-streamer in China

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INTRODUCTION

The popularization of e-sports has made game-related contents thrive on Internet these two years in China. Game live-streaming is one of the most popular kinds, which attracts millions of viewers. There are some online video platforms also focusing on games and e-sports in China and becoming head platforms, such as Twitch.tv, the dominant game livestreaming platform. Game-livestreaming platforms, known as ‘intimate companions’ of game and e-sports, play a crucial part in the game-consumer market. With the development of domestic game livestreaming platforms, there has been a speeding-up growth of grassroot game live-streamers, and this job has also become a popular career choice. Over ten thousand grassroot game-players are taking live-streaming as a fulltime job and living on it. According to the data from CNNIC, the number of audiences on livestreaming platforms had increased to more than four hundred million until June 2018, and most of them prefer game contents over other choices.

There are several head game livestreaming platforms in China, including ‘Penguin e-sports’, ‘Huya.tv’, ‘Douyu.com’, etc. Most of them share a similar business pattern, including broadcasting e-sports matches, signing contracts with professional e-sports teams, sponsoring online and off-line matches and doing the daily live-streaming. And the last part contributes the overwhelming majority incomes. Under the circumstance, grassroot live-streamers has become vital to platforms and are becoming more and more like a ‘superstar’ surrounded by fans, who are willing to subscribe their channels and donate money by sending virtual gifts.

In this paper, I try to explore the streaming behavior of a grassroot live-streamer and the spectating behavior of his viewers. Since anybody who is not an e-sports-player but a grassroot game player choosing live-streaming as a career path faces fierce competition, he needs to attract more viewers as much as he can in order to make himself irreplaceable, which means just playing online is far from being enough, and interacting with viewers becomes more important. In this paper, methodologically, I try to use ‘observation method’ to follow the famous streamer ‘Zhangdaxian’ (A top

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streamer of the game ‘King of Honor’ who owns more than 5 million viewers) on DOUYU.com for over 6 months, focusing on the streamers’ appearance, acts and conversations with viewers, to verify the following three hypotheses.

Firstly, self-image builds boundary. For instance, besides showing the viewers that he is a skillful player, a streamer tends to make his image outstanding by wearing a mask or a pin, or having a special haircut. They tend to express themselves in front of the camera by showing their daily life like eating a particular kind of food or raising a pet. In this way the streamer can build a unique self-image. Then, like a salaryman, the streamer will set a regular streaming time and have a fixed streaming space including a fixed virtual room and a fixed background (often a corner of one’s room) in real-life. By settling these external appearances, a streamer will accomplish his self-disclosure process, and build a virtual boundary between other streamers.

Secondly, interactive acts and discourses link streams and viewers. To be more specific, there are certain ways allowing streamers to take acts, the most favored one of which is to play games with their viewers. Apart from acts, words play a much more important role. A streamer should always be ‘a master of words’, which means he has his own way in talking to viewers, sometimes a particular expression or someone’s pet phrase, which will become symbols of the streamer. Furthermore, the viewers can communicate with the streamer and other viewers by using ‘barrage’ (bullet screen, which is the main method to comment in Chinese platforms), and streamers can response to them soon enough to keep on communicating. Such interactions make certain words or sentences share a distinctive meaning, and help to form a pattern of actions linking directly to the streamer. So that the streamer and his viewers can draw boundaries separating them from other streamers and their fans.

Thirdly, interactive acts and discourses form a communication ritual. When the streamer becomes the core, the viewers together will strengthen the boundaries through interacting with the streamer and one another. So, particular meanings are carried through those acts and discourses, which continually contribute to building a communication ritual of daily streaming. And it will finally develop into a special fan culture within Chinese game-livestreaming area allowing a grassroot gameplayer to live on livestreaming.

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