Live streamer *Paracommunity* on Twitch and Discord

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INTRODUCTION

The live streaming platform Twitch has grown steadily since its start in 2011 (Taylor, 2018) and saw a massive increase in growth in 2020, maintaining its position as the number one video game live streaming site, ahead of YouTube Gaming and Facebook Gaming (Partis, 2021). Simultaneously playing games and responding to a live chat box, Twitch streamers need to be "always giving viewers something new to look at…minimizing the 'down time' that might lead to disinterest, and thus a viewer turning off" (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019, 817). Considering the social nature of the platform, multiple studies of Twitch have adopted the concept of 'parasocial relationships' (PSRs) to theorize how streamers develop consistent, financially supportive audiences (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017; Wolff, et. al., 2022; Wulf, et. al., 2020).

Horton and Wohl's 1956 work coining the term *para-social relationships* describes "the illusion of coming face-to-face with the [televised] performer…met *as if they* were in the circle of one's peers" (215; emphasis original). Over sixty years later, Kreissl et. al. (2021) examine how PSRs operate on YouTube, noting performer practices of *imagined awareness* (e.g. actively addressing the camera/audience), and *interactivity and responsiveness* (e.g. incorporating comments/suggestions) (1026-7). In contrast to Horton and Wohls' assertion that audience input "lie[s] outside the para-social interaction" (215), Kreissl et. al. find that YouTuber responses to audience input encourage and reinforce PSRs. The authors further suggest that Twitter and Instagram may serve to *extend* this parasocial community beyond the boundaries of YouTube (1036). The researchers note a limitation in their study however, as it draws on previous studies of YouTube and "it cannot be ruled out that PSRs to [video game] Let's Players consist of specific dimensions that have not yet been identified in prior research and were, thus, not investigated in this study" (2021, 1037). The current on-going project presents a development in how PSRs have evolved, this time on the live streaming platform Twitch.

Whereas "Let's Play" YouTubers interact asynchronously with viewers, Twitch streamers play video games and interact with viewers simultaneously, offering a novel space for PSRs to emerge. Key to this development are the ways Twitch streamers use Discord channels to extend and sustain their audience communities (echoing Kreissl et. al.'s mention of Twitter and Instagram). As a result, streamers describe parasocial relationships as *two-way* and *communal*. Based on these findings, an argument will be made for the term *paracommunity* to describe entirely online, self-sufficient communities of blended play and labor centered around an initial parasocial actor.

PROJECT

The project is a longitudinal study of Twitch streamers consisting of multiple interviews and observation hours of their respective broadcasts, from 2022 to 2023. Interviews with Twitch live streamers reveal

strategies that center live video game play around the central actor (the streamer), construct gaming as co-consumptive (with the viewing audience), and moderate interactions using expectations of behavioral norms (defined via channel guidelines and moderator decisions). Streamer-viewer interactions are not limited to the Twitch platform, however. To maintain viewer attention outside of broadcast times, streamers utilize the messaging app Discord to continuously communicate with viewers. Discord functions include voting, donations, pay-walls, and live streaming. Discord also recently announced paid subscription channels, suggesting ambitious monetization plans (Yang, 2022).

Discussing their combined use of Twitch and Discord, streamers report that parasocial relationships on both platforms are typically two-ways: they think of their audiences while not streaming, constantly interact in both spaces, and invite input from their audiences. Broadcast highlights are edited and shared by users on Twitch/Discord, and streamers can re-upload these to other platforms for monetized consumption. Streamers create ad hoc pay-walled sections of Discord where subscribers can discuss production decisions directly with the creator. They encourage viewers to produce and exchange art, memes, and media related to their channel content. Twitch channel labor is thus diffused amongst the 'always-on' communities, which persist even without direct attention and interaction from the streamer. Viewers interact as a *paracommunity* defined by mutual interest in the streamer, adherence to that streamer's rules, and a playful attitude of collaborative, unpaid creative work.

DISCUSSION

Recognizing Harmon's previous use of the term *paracommunity* related to television newscasters (1997), the suggested definition of *paracommunity* here refers to the digital community generated by a content creator's efforts to create a persistent, interactive space of play. A *paracommunity* relies upon networked *parasocial relationships* in which online members understand one another to be *united in their mutual enjoyment* of the centralized content creator, *engaged in persistent play* while in these designated spaces, and *self-regulating their behavior* according to that creator's expressed norms and expectations.

Previous studies have framed the basis for this shift towards paracommunity. Abidin (2018) illustrates how 'networked selves' operate across platforms, Duffy (2017) details the aspirational labor of extended interaction, and Marwick (2013) describes creator's 'self-branded' position at the center of their networks. These theories of online microcelebrity blend with analyses of online play: motivations of Twitch viewers examined by Wohn, et. al. (2018; 2019) and Hu, et. al. (2016) are openly capitalized on by streamers seeking to expand the breadth of their appeal. Peña's (2018) depiction of audiences and players making gameplay choices together highlights the spectrum of performer-player-viewer that entices viewers to feel like co-performers.

Paracommunity characterizes a significant development in parasocial relationships: just as streamers describe themselves as a mix of host, entertainer, producer, and role model, viewers are likewise invited to see themselves as guests, customers, co-producers, and admirers simultaneously.

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