

Parasocial Incidental Politics: How Twitch Users Navigate Political Content and Misinformation in Livestreaming Environments

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INTRODUCTION

Livestreaming platforms such as Twitch have become central environments of contemporary gaming culture and everyday media use among young adults, yet their political relevance remains underexplored. Although explicit political communication on Twitch is comparatively rare, political meaning emerges incidental through affective closeness between viewers and streamers and dynamic community interactions (Roca-Trenchs et al., 2023). At the same time, the real-time and emotionally charged character of livestreaming creates conditions in which misinformation can spread rapidly and remain temporarily unverified. This study examines how young users perceive political content and misinformation on Twitch and how they interpret the political role of streamers. Drawing on 60 semi-structured interviews and a grounded theory approach, the study develops the framework of *parasocial incidental politics* to explain how political meaning emerges unintentionally within parasocially shaped livestreaming environments.

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THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Twitch exemplifies a hybrid media system in which entertainment, interpersonal communication, spontaneous reactions, and algorithmically amplified visibility intersect (Chadwick, 2017; Chadwick et al., 2015). While Twitch also hosts a variety of non-game-related livestreams, the platform is historically and structurally rooted in video game culture and gameplay practices. It emerged as a dedicated space for broadcasting gameplay and continues to be shaped by game-related affordances such as real-time play, performance, and audience interaction (Gandolfi, 2016; Lux, 2022).

From a game studies perspective, Twitch can therefore be understood as part of contemporary gaming culture, which encompasses not only playing games but also watching, discussing, and socially organizing around gameplay as a central cultural practice (Hamilton et al., 2014; Shaw, 2010). Live streaming extends these practices by transforming gameplay into a performative and communal activity, where meaning emerges through the interaction between streamer, audience, and game content (Hamilton et al., 2014). This study explicitly focuses on game-related streaming environments on Twitch, where ongoing gameplay shapes communication, audience interaction, and the entertainment-oriented atmosphere of livestreams. Even when political content is not directly tied to a specific game, it remains embedded within gaming practices and communities, which shape how such content is perceived, negotiated, and legitimized.

Political meaning often arises unintentionally through everyday commentary, humor, or moral positioning encountered during real-time interactions. Livestreams are marked by strong perceptions of authenticity: spontaneous statements appear particularly “real,” making them central cues for political interpretation (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). At the same time, platform affordances such as synchronicity, and dense chat activity intensify the spread of misinformation by fostering emotional reactions and hindering verification (Guess et al., 2020). Unlike explicitly political (Rothut, 2025), Twitch streamers rarely engage in sustained political communication. Nevertheless, they may become politically meaningful through parasocial intimacy and perceived authenticity. This study addresses this gap through three research questions:

RQ1: How is Twitch embedded in the everyday media practices of young adults?

RQ2: How do Twitch users evaluate political content and misinformation?

RQ3: What political role do users attribute to streamers?

METHOD

The analysis draws on 60 problem-centered interviews with Twitch users aged 16 to 29, including heavy users and casual users. The interview guide covered media biographies, everyday usage, perceptions of political content, experiences with misinformation, and assessments of streamer influence. Following grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2015), coding proceeded through open, focused, and axial stages, accompanied by ongoing theoretical elaboration. Twelve categories were developed and integrated into four core dimensions.

FINDINGS

Participants describe Twitch as an ambient companion (RQ1): constantly present but not continuously in focus. Streams accompany everyday routines, creating emotional stability and a sense of co-presence. Twitch is framed as a calmer “safe space” compared to overstimulating platforms such as TikTok. It is embedded in a cross-platform ecosystem: many users first encounter streamers through YouTube; curated clips and algorithmic recommendations maintain a sense of continuity across platforms. This cross-platform circulation enables persistent parasocial relationships and a near-daily presence of favored streamers.

Participants diverge on the prevalence of politics on Twitch (RQ2): some perceive politics as increasingly visible, while others rarely encounter it. Politics is primarily understood as event-driven, for example international conflicts or campaign appearances. More decisive than frequency, however, are the interactional conditions under which politics emerges. Chats are described as emotionally charged environments in which political topics escalate rapidly and require active moderation. Interviewees report “war-like atmospheres” when political debates unfold in chat. Political meaning arises less from intentional communication than from spontaneous moral cues, expressions of solidarity, humor, or judgments of fairness. Even when streamers avoid explicit politics, these cues are interpreted politically. Consequently, political content emerges atmospherically embedded in reactions and micro-commentaries rather than through structured political messaging. Interviewees distinguish between everyday misinformation, for example exaggerations or interpersonal drama, perceived as relatively harmless and political disinformation, which is considered a structural issue on the platform. The speed and social density of livestreaming allow half-knowledge to circulate rapidly and become “stamped as fact.” Emotional arousal increases susceptibility to unverified claims. While viewers generally expect streamers to issue corrections, they also acknowledge that real-time fact-checking is nearly impossible amid ongoing gameplay and technical multitasking. Individual verification strategies occur but inevitably lag behind the pace of livestreams, leaving political claims temporarily unchallenged.

From the viewer perspective, streamers intentionally avoid political topics to prevent community division or reputational risk (RQ3). Nevertheless, users attribute political influence to them based on parasocial intimacy and perceived authenticity rather than explicit persuasion. Spontaneous reactions during livestreams are seen as especially revealing and trustworthy. These reactions influence viewers’ political perceptions more strongly than curated content on other social platforms. Community norms and dominant chat voices mediate how political cues are interpreted. Streamers act as symbolic anchors: even without explicit positions, viewers infer political orientations from “values between the lines.” Explicit endorsements, however, are seen as disruptive to the entertainment setting. Thus, political influence becomes subtle and embedded in routines of shared presence.

DISCUSSION

The study introduces *parasocial incidental politics* (see figure 1) as a framework for understanding how political sense-making emerges within livestreaming environments. The concept describes how political sense-making develops unintentionally through the interplay of real-time communication, perceived

closeness, and hybrid media dynamics. Rather than stemming from intentional political messaging, political influence develops through spontaneous cues and continuous parasocial engagement.

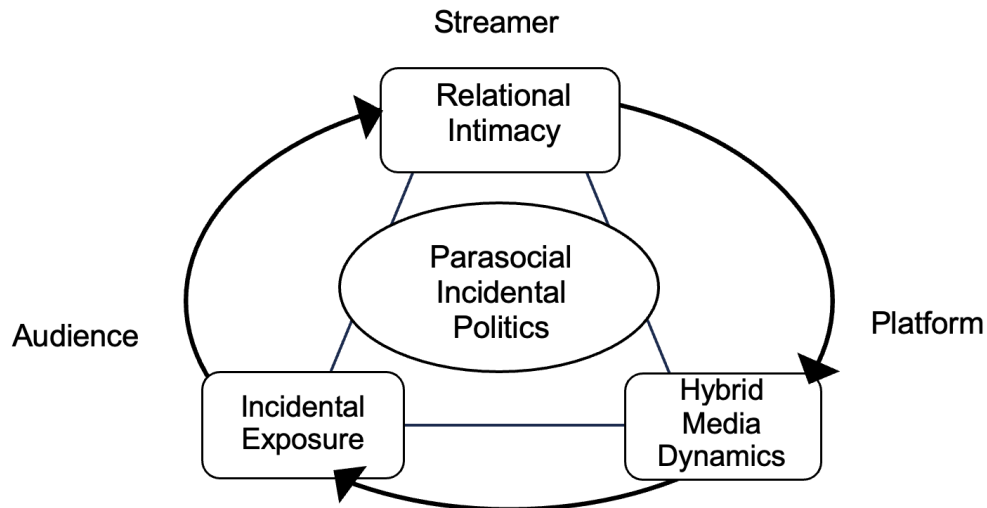


Figure 1: Framework of parasocial incidental politics

Our framework (see figure 1) illustrates three mechanisms: (1) *Relational intimacy*, referring to familiarity, emotional closeness, and ongoing co-presence between streamers and viewers. (2) *Incidental exposure*, capturing the situational, unintended appearance of political cues within entertainment-oriented contexts. (3) *Hybrid media dynamics*, highlighting the entanglement of interpersonal interaction, entertainment, and public commentary across platforms. These mechanisms become communicatively enacted through the dimensions of: *Platform*, *Streamer* and *Audience*, which structure visibility, relational anchoring, and interpretative circulation. Together, they generate parasocial incidental politics: a form of political sense-making shaped not by explicit persuasion but by spontaneous and affective cues embedded in everyday streamer–viewer interactions.

Importantly, the findings show that political communication on Twitch cannot be separated from the logics of gameplay and gaming culture. The need to maintain gameplay flow, the prioritization of entertainment, and the norms of gaming communities shape both the articulation and reception of political content. This distinguishes political communication on Twitch from non-game-related livestreaming environments, where such constraints are less pronounced.

While this study introduces *parasocial incidental politics* as a framework for understanding political sense-making in livestreaming environments, the findings also contribute more specifically to research on misinformation in digital media contexts. In this study, misinformation is understood broadly as inaccurate, misleading, or insufficiently verified claims perceived by users as potentially deceptive or socially consequential, independent of intentionality (Guess & Lyons, 2020). The findings

suggest that on Twitch, misinformation operates under distinct temporal and relational conditions. It emerges in real time through spontaneous commentary, is encountered primarily via incidental exposure within entertainment contexts, and is shaped by parasocial trust in streamers. Incidental exposure reduces critical evaluation and increases reliance on heuristics (Guess, 2020). At the same time, interactive chat dynamics and emotional engagement accelerate the circulation of unverified claims, often outpacing corrective mechanisms. Misinformation on Twitch thus appears less as deliberate deception and more as a product of situational communication, affective engagement, and real-time constraints, embedded within gaming-related livestreaming practices.

The study concludes that Twitch is not a political medium in the conventional sense, yet it is politically significant precisely because political meaning emerges subtly and often unintentionally within everyday entertainment practices. Livestreaming fosters trust-based navigation of political cues while simultaneously enabling the rapid spread of misinformation. The findings suggest that political orientation on livestreaming platforms develops less through explicit political persuasion than through parasocial trust, shared presence, and everyday interaction embedded in gaming-related media environments.

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