
Digital Patronage Platforms

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ABSTRACT

Digital patronage refers to the act of singular and sustained financial support to a content creator as a form of appreciation for their work and occurs within unique sociotechnical systems that support financial exchange in addition to creative expression. In this paper, we present a competitive analysis of five patronage platforms– Twitch.tv, YouTube, Patreon, Facebook, and OnlyFans. We describe the financial ecosystems of the five platforms and the perk systems embedded in each of the systems that incentivizes patrons to give support. Digital patronage represents an emerging form of sociotechnical practice that offers an alternative to advertisement-driven business models.

ACM Reference Format:

Ross Bonifacio and Donghee Yvette Wohn. 2020. Digital Patronage Platforms. In *Companion Publication of the 2020 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW '20 Companion)*, October 17–21, 2020, Virtual Event, USA. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 6 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3406865.3418332>

INTRODUCTION

Twitch, YouTube, Patreon, Facebook, and OnlyFans are online platforms primarily used for distributing and/or supporting creative content. Each of these platforms have their own special features but share one common characteristic– they enable financial support that is both one-time [16] as well as recurring [17]. This study explores the similarities and differences between these patronage platforms regarding the different types of content showcased on each, how the companies and creators make

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CSCW '20 Companion, October 17–21, 2020, Virtual Event, USA

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ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-8059-1/20/10.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3406865.3418332>

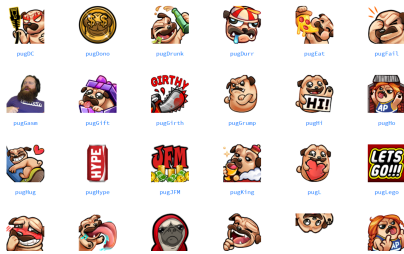


Figure 1: An example of unique emotes, or emojis, that patrons can use if they pay for a Twitch subscription to the streamer Angrypug. Access to virtual gifts, such as emotes, are a mechanism used by some platforms for patron incentives.

DIGITAL PATRONAGE PLATFORMS

Twitch is a live streaming video platform which was introduced in 2011 and bought by Amazon in 2014. On Twitch, users can broadcast any content live; the majority of content is gaming.

Patreon was founded in 2013, and it provides creators a medium to share and fund their work through their audience. A creator page on Patreon mainly has three functions: an overview tab provides a general description of the creator, a post tab contains anything posted on Patreon (both patron-only and public, with the patron-only posts locked for people who haven't subscribed to the particular tier the post belongs to), and a message-board type community tab for patron interaction. Content delivery may or may not be through Patreon.

YouTube is a video sharing platform that launched in 2005 [11] and operates as a subsidiary under Google [11]. Digital patronage on YouTube first started through YouTube Gaming, created in 2015, which focuses on gaming live streams. Through a "sponsorships" program, on certain channels viewers could give money in exchange for perks [5]. YouTube expanded their patronage feature into "Channel Memberships" in June 2018, which could be used by a wider scope of creators. A channel must be in the YouTube Partner Program and have more than 30,000 subscribers to be considered for this feature [19]. Gaming channels must have more than 1,000 subscribers.[19]

money, and how they incentivize their users to provide financial support. Understanding how digital patronage platforms facilitate financial support of content creators is important because it represents an alternative business model— advertisement-based revenue requires high traffic, which is not a viable business model for small or niche content creators. With a better understanding of digital patronage platforms, the HCI/CSCW community has the opportunity to facilitate the design and research of this new method of financing creators.

FINANCIAL ECOSYSTEM

Aside from advertisement-based revenue, each of these platforms have unique systems through which content creators earn monetary support from patrons. In this section we discuss the financial structures of each of the platforms and the types of monetary interactions they facilitate.

Twitch does not process direct monetary donations to the streamer, but allows for integration of third party tools such as PayPal or Venmo through which supporters can give money. Third party tools such as Tiltify also allow people to directly donate to non-profit organizations but still be recognized for their donation on the streamer's channel— this is mostly used for charity streams [14]. Streamers who create links on their channel to merchandise on Amazon can also receive a commission on sales. Twitch also tries to connect potential sponsors with streamers for sponsored content.

YouTube allows patrons to provide financial support through Channel Memberships. In return they receive exclusive access to exclusive content, custom badges, and custom emojis [20]. Initially, Channel Memberships allowed only one tier that patrons can choose, which was a monthly fee of \$4.99, but on July 11, 2019, YouTube introduced the ability to offer up to five tiers of different price points called "Membership levels". A creator is able to determine the price point of each Membership level [18]. Creators receive 70% of the revenue share after sales tax is deducted. YouTube covers all transaction costs, such as credit card fees. Creators may receive less than 70% if they are in a Multi-Channel Network (MCN), which may take an additional revenue share.

Another way viewers can support that was made possible by YouTube was through a collaboration with Teespring [1]. This lets creators sell their own merchandise with a small store bar attached to each of their videos [1]. YouTube also has features for one-time donations. These features allow creators to display a donate button next to their videos, live streams, and live chats [21]. This feature can only be used by qualifying U.S. non-profits [22].

Patreon is based on a tier system where patrons are charged per month or per content. The platform not only offers tiers for patrons, but also allows creators to choose from three different plans: Lite, Pro, and Premium. Patreon earns revenue through these plans—Lite requires creators to pay five percent of the income they earned through Patreon, while Pro and Premium take eight and twelve percent respectively. Lite does not allow creators to offer subscription tiers, and Premium is meant for established creators and creative businesses.

DIGITAL PATRONAGE PLATFORMS

Facebook first introduced a digital patronage feature called "Subscription Groups" in June 2018, initially limited to admins of select Facebook Groups [6]. In July 2019, it expanded into a feature called "Fan Subscriptions" which could be used by select Facebook Pages. As of January 3, 2020, the Fan Subscription feature is only available for invited Pages in certain regions of the world [7] and only one tier of \$4.99 available [2]. With Fan Subscriptions, the audience of a Page can pay a monthly fee to gain access to certain perks, such as access to exclusive content and more personal interaction with a creator [2].

OnlyFans is a subscription-based platform that launched in 2016. Users can subscribe to content creators and pay a monthly fee to view their content [15]. Users can also be charged pay-per-view to see a specific post by a creator, as well as make one-time payment tips to creators [15]. Creators can upload pictures and videos on the platform. Users can like and comment on creators' posts, as well as directly message creators [15]. OnlyFans has become popular within the adult entertainment industry, especially because the other aforementioned patronage platforms heavily restrict adult content and do not allow creators to post live action pornography [3]. Due to its relatively lax Terms of Service, OnlyFans does not have a mobile app available on the Apple app store since Apple does not allow apps that host "overtly sexual and pornographic material" [3, 15]. Since OnlyFans is based in the United Kingdom, the SESTA and FOSTA laws of the United States did not influence its Terms of Service in the same way the other four stricter platforms were (as they are all based in the United States).

Facebook incorporates patronage features through its Fan Subscription program, which lets eligible creators charge patrons \$4.99 per month for access to exclusive content. Fan Subscriptions that began prior to January 1, 2020 allowed creators to receive 100% of the net revenue after other fees were deducted; subscriptions that began on or after January 1, 2020 are subject to a revenue share deduction up to 30% from Facebook [8]. Facebook also has a feature for one-time donations. This feature is only available for Facebook Pages of non-profit organizations based in the U.S. [10].

OnlyFans has a monthly subscription model, and creators can choose to have tiers of different price points. It also offers a tipping feature that allows patrons to make a one-time donation to a creator [15]. The minimum amount a subscription may be is \$4.99, while the maximum is \$49.99 [15]. The minimum amount a creator can charge for paid private messages or tips is \$4.99 [15]. OnlyFans is also unique as it offers creators the option to use the pay-per-view model [4]. Creators retain 80% of their earnings, while OnlyFans collects a 20% revenue share [15].

PATRON INCENTIVES

Twitch has features such as emotes, badges, special alerts, exclusive chat rooms and competitions, and ad-free viewing to incentivize users to support streamers. Emotes are emoticons that are specially designed by each streamer and can be used in any chat room on Twitch or text messaging (see Fig. 1). Badges are icons that are shown next to the subscriber's username in the respective streamer's chat room. Exclusive chat rooms and competitions can be made by the streamer to favor the viewers who subscribe. Ad-free viewing removes all ads from a stream for a subscriber. Each streamer chooses what kind of perks are given to the viewers when they support in a certain way.

Patreon allows creators to come up with their own tiers and rewards. Patrons are offered various benefits for each tier; the benefits increase as the tiers go up in order to induce patrons to subscribe to higher tiers. Patrons can receive a variety of rewards, such as behind-the-scenes information about the creator's life or content-making process, merchandise, digital goods, early access to content, advertisement-free viewing experiences, and much more.

Benefits patrons are offered are not limited to content on Patreon; creators also use other platforms to reward their patrons. Creators can set up chat rooms for patrons using Patreon Discord integration, a patron-only Facebook group, or patron-only Snapchat access.

YouTube has Channel Memberships that offer patrons exclusive access to exclusive content, custom badges, and custom emojis [20]. Patrons must be offered at least one "perk", or reward, and creators can offer up to five perks to their patrons [20]. Patrons receive exclusive access to certain Community posts, videos, and live chats [20]. A patron can have six different kinds of badges from a creator that are based on how long the patron has paid for a Channel Membership. Patrons can be offered custom emojis, which are small ideograms that can be used by patrons in live chats hosted by the creator [20].

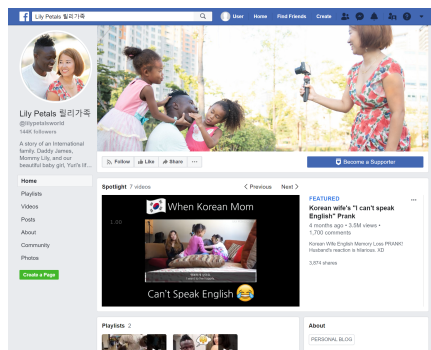


Figure 2: The Facebook Page of Lily Petals, a blog of a mixed race family, displays a blue button on the right that says, "Become a Supporter." Clicking on it will open a window listing the rewards a patron can receive for paying for a Fan Subscription.

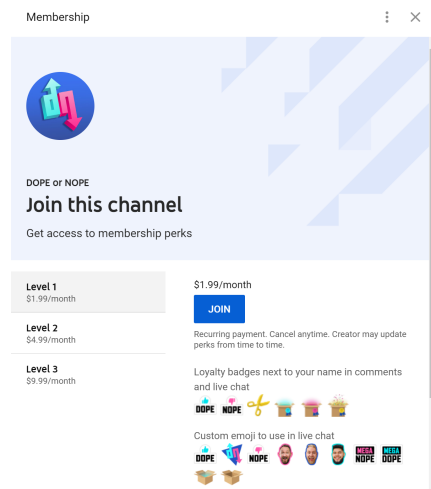


Figure 3: The window that appears if one chooses to subscribe to a Youtube Channel Membership. It displays the three different price points and the custom badges and emojis patrons can receive.

Facebook Fan Subscriptions offer patrons various types of exclusive content and more personal interaction as rewards for their patrons [9]. Patrons receive a variety of content from creators, such as exclusive posts, photos, and videos. Other types of exclusive content patrons may receive are polls, Q&A sessions, discounts on merchandise, private live videos, and access to a backlog of patron-only content that was previously posted [9]. Patrons may also receive content earlier before it is posted publicly with exclusive Premieres and Watch Parties. Patrons can also receive a supporter badge as a reward [9].

OnlyFans offers patrons exclusive content from creators, primarily in the form of photos, videos and livestreams, as well as personal interaction with creators. Unlike the other platforms, patrons can be offered free trials or temporarily discounted sales on their subscription tiers to entice new patrons to support a creator [15]. As a part of the pay-per-view model, patrons can receive a "free" subscription, but must pay a fee to "unlock" a specific video or photo in order to view it [4, 15]. Patrons can receive personal interaction by directly messaging a creator, but may be charged to send a message or to view a creator's reply to a direct message [4]. Depending on the creator's discretion, patrons may request and pay for specific content from a creator that is apart from the usual stream of content that comes with the subscription [3, 13]. The tipping feature has been commonly used by patrons to request specific additional content. Some creators report that the platform allows them to have more personal interaction with their patrons, which may motivate users to choose OnlyFans over other websites that provide adult entertainment [3, 12].

CONCLUSION

Digital patronage enables people to provide financial support to content creators. Platforms that support this activity have many common features such as badges that represent patron loyalty, but also differ in that some platforms support gated (exclusive) content and others do not. We also see that platforms' policies about how much of a cut they receive from patrons keep changing or are unclear. No one platform was particularly unique in terms of patronage structure, which means that platforms will still have to figure out how to attract the best creators. The growth and evolution of patronage platforms in the past few years, however, signals that there is a market for people who are willing to pay for content online, signaling the rise of alternative methods of monetization outside of advertising-based revenue.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Supported in part by NSF 1841354. Thanks to Peter Jough and Peter Eskander for their early involvement in Twitch research.

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