

How a Live Streamer's Choice in Played Game Affects Mental Health Conversations

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ABSTRACT

As more viewers become interested in watching authentic personalities as opposed to artificial, crafted performances, Twitch streamers have begun to discuss personal issues such as mental health to form a closer bond with their community. This paper seeks to further explore how a live streamer's choice in game affects their viewers' perception of their stream's content. We interviewed 24 Twitch viewers and found that the pace of the game a streamer chooses to stream is a key factor in what viewers expect to see during the stream. These expectations at least partially determine whether viewers want to hear conversations about mental health.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**.

KEYWORDS

live streaming; mental health; Twitch; gaming

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1 INTRODUCTION

Twitch.tv is a pivotal part of the gaming community: the primary choice in platform for North American and European game streamers [11]. Its gaming content is diverse, ranging from casual gameplay to live tournament footage [1]. Participatory media platforms

like Twitch also enable streamers to become micro-celebrities [6], allowing them to grow a community of like-minded viewers centered around them [4, 12].

Since live streaming games usually consists of both gameplay and viewer engagement, Twitch viewers have different motivations for watching different streamers. Past research has shown that besides entertainment, the two key motivations between most viewers are escapism [3] and skill improvement [8]. Watching others play video games can provide escapism not only via immersion into the game, but also by being part of a streamer's community [4]. Extant literature also explores viewer motivation from a financial perspective, noting that viewers were more likely to provide initial patronage to streamers who either developed a strong sense of community in their channel or appeared to have genuine personas [13, 14].

Recent studies have begun to explore the impact streamers have on their community's perceptions of mental health. Micro-celebrities disclosing their mental illnesses, for example, can educate their followers on the prevalence and risk of mental illnesses [5] and can do so while they broadcast their content or by supporting mental health organizations through charity streams [7, 10]. Streamers that talked about mental health on stream are read as more authentic by viewers [5]. Those who used their platform to discuss the topic has led to their viewers discussing it more frequently and in a positive light [9].

Understanding the relationship between streamers, the gaming community, and mental health increases in importance as live streaming influences gaming culture. Gaming live streams provide researchers with a new way to interact with and observe the gaming community. This study intends to explore how the choices in personal branding a streamer makes can influence their community's response to mental health as a topic. Our primary research question, as a result, is: *How do the games a streamer plays impact their community's attitudes toward mental health conversations?*

2 METHODOLOGY

The data used in this study is part of a larger data set collected to explore the nature of mental health conversations on Twitch. Participants were recruited through a previous survey distributed at TwitchCon 2019¹, our personal networks, and recruitment posts

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¹TwitchCon is a convention organized by Twitch meant for streamers and platform enthusiasts.

on Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, and gaming servers on Discord. Participants ranged from 18 to 39 years in age (Mean = 25.10, SD = 5.63), and the majority of these were male (15; 8 female, 1 non-binary).

We conducted 24 semi-structured interviews primarily on Discord, and one through a phone call, where the audio from each interview was recorded. The interviews lasted for an average of 59 minutes (SD = 24.9), ranging from 32 minutes to 2 hours long. Participants were asked background questions, such as what types of games they have seen streamers play, as well as content questions, such as how the streamer navigates discussions during streams and if the discussion affects the game-play. After the completion of each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed by an online transcription service, which was then edited and reviewed by multiple authors. Relevant information related to the main research questions was derived from each interview into a spreadsheet for analysis. Three of the authors distilled each game listed by the participants as slow-paced or fast-paced. Following this, we iteratively sorted and organized responses into four main themes that answered our research question: reception to slow-paced games, avoidance to conversations, varieties of responses to fast-paced games, and games which initiate discussions.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Mental Health Conversations as Part of Slow-Paced Games Streams

We defined slow-paced games as games that do not require players' to focus entirely on the game while playing. P15 (23, male), when asked whether or not it was common for gamers to talk about mental health during games, said that he has only heard conversations about mental health during games that require little attention, like *Stardew Valley*, and would expect games like *Call of Duty* to be too distracting for the streamer. As slow-paced games require less attention on the streamer's part, they are more likely to feel comfortable talking to their viewers about a subject as sensitive as mental health while they play.

Consequently, viewers see mental health conversations as an expected part of slow-paced gaming streams. P18 (18, male) describes the environment slow-paced games foster as follows: "I view it as kind of a natural progression because, say someone is playing a game that's associated with being easy or you're supposed to play with friends... you're watching it for the personality of the people who are playing the game, not for the individual gameplay or the high skill levels of gameplay." For viewers who are watching streams of slower-paced games primarily for the streamer's personality, hearing them discuss a personal subject is seen as normal.

In a few instances, participants mentioned streamers also feeling more comfortable bringing up their own mental health or effects of an action that influenced their mental health. As described by P19 (21, male), one streamer illustrates how his community's response to his projects in *Minecraft* positively impacted his mental health: "[RTGameCrowd] loves seeing what the community does to [his community building project] ... he loves that so many people are active and support his channel ... he does this not only because it's his career, but also because of how positively it affects his life." Slow-paced games allow streamers to have an opportunity to talk

about how their community on the game has impacted their mental health without it negatively affecting their gameplay.

3.2 Avoiding Mental Health Conversations through Fast-Paced Games

In contrast, fast-paced games refer to high action games that demand players' constant attention to the game. P23 (21, male) discusses how fast-paced games, specifically first person shooters (FPS), are not conducive to mental health discussions; during streams of these games, the streamers "sometimes... don't even talk, they'll go like 5 to 10 minutes without even saying a word... they're just focused on the game". As streamers are expected to focus primarily on the game, having any kind of conversation is difficult. Because of this difficulty in having conversations, discussing sensitive topics such as mental health becomes even less likely. P23 says that, because of this, he watches streams of fast-paced games when he specifically does *not* want to hear about mental health.

3.3 Streamer Adapts for Fast-Paced Games

Within fast-paced game streams, some streamers adapt to allow for mental health discussions to play out, irrespective of the game's speed and intensity. Some viewers found that streamers who typically stop the stream to discuss mental health tend to do so after a certain amount of gameplay, sometimes even pausing the game and switching to a face camera. This can be for planned discussions of mental health, or for more serious, critical mental health circumstances. For example, one participant (P18; male, 18) recounted the time DrLupo (Fortnite streamer) once received a donation from a viewer with a message indicating their intent to harm themselves. In response to this, DrLupo paused the game mid-match, switched to a face camera, and told the viewer to contact hotlines to get support. In other instances, streamers will focus on their gameplay for a bit, and then divert their attention to discuss mental health with the community, as described by P23 (21, male): "[The streamer said] 'We're going to go switch [to] Just Chatting in a couple minutes', I [thought] 'Oh, what is he going to do? Is [he] just going to eat on stream or something?' But then he opens up Discord [and] was talking to some people on there". Streamers such as these prefer to set dedicated times in their stream to separate the fast-paced games with heartfelt discussions that bring the community together.

Whereas some streamers may pause their game to have mental health discussions mid-stream, others prefer to have these kinds of discussions separate from their game streams. They preface such a mental health-focused stream by informing their viewers if the stream is gaming-focused or "Just Chatting", setting the mood of the stream and affecting the nature of discussions. P9 (27, male) describes an *Apex Legends* (FPS) streamer who they observe being extremely interactive with their chat and open to mental health discussions: "A lot of the times they'll only delve into the topic when they're... just chatting or between game modes... most of them aren't in the middle of an *Apex* battle". As fast-paced games require more focus on the streamer's part to play, using natural pauses in the game or separate streams to talk about sensitive topics like mental health is easier for these streamers.

Conversely, some viewers observed that streamers they associated with a high skill level have an easier time discussing mental

health during a fast-paced game. As explained by P22 (29, female), “it’s about the streamer[’s] ... ability of keeping up with chat and their comfortableness with responding to chat while playing” that allows them to multitask. Furthermore, P6 (24, female) gives an example on how a *Destiny* (FPS) streamer they watch has brought a mental health professional onto their stream to facilitate mental health discussions during the high action gameplay. “It seemed like what a normal therapy session would be ... He can still focus on a game while having to chat at the same time.” These streamers who multitask fulfill their viewer’s desire to both have such conversations and follow a fast-paced game.

While many streamers carry on mental health conversations on Twitch - during the game, between games, or in the Just Chatting category of streams - some viewers found that some streamers prefer to talk about it off of Twitch altogether, using platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram Live. Some streamers prefer to bring it up in their YouTube channel or Twitter rather than talking about it live, as “mental health is a lot easier to talk about ... in a text post” (P1; 20, female). In one instance, a streamer started an Instagram Live session to discuss his mental health so as to avoid hurting his stream’s viewership: “When they have the ease of accessibility of sending out a tweet or starting up a live stream on Instagram, it becomes a lot easier to ... open up the conversation” (P18; 18, male). Streaming fast paced games does not mean mental health discussions cannot occur, however fast-paced game streamers need to specifically dedicate time and resources to mental health discussions.

3.4 Game Content Initiates Discussions about Mental Health

Regardless of a game’s pace, game-specific content can also initiate mental health discussions. When asked about ideal times to bring up mental health during a live stream, P2 (24, male) explained how streams featuring games related to mental health, specifically *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice*, can lead streamers and their chat to discuss the subject. As this game was considered a fast-paced game, the game having themes about mental health made it more natural for the streamer to talk about mental health objectively, despite the game’s speed and intensity. However, this could also theoretically occur in shorter games with similar themes; only one participant mentioned this specifically in the present study, but the possibility that this occurs in other games exists.

4 DISCUSSION

Our results show that the pace of the game is one of the most significant factors when it comes to how mental health conversations are perceived and experienced by stream viewers. While other factors, like a streamer’s desire to talk about mental health and the game being played, can influence the frequency of these discussions, the pace of the game being played informs the viewers’ expectations. As faster-paced games generally require creative adaptation or skill on the streamer’s part to discuss topics like mental health, they are discussed less on these streams. Thus, these kinds of streams are preferred by viewers who are more interested in watching gameplay than listening to a discussion. Twitch could provide several resources to facilitate fast-paced game streamers’ discussions with

their audience, particularly for less experienced streamers who are learning how to multitask effectively. One potential means of doing so includes using Twitch’s Creator Camp program² to show ways to discuss sensitive topics like mental health, while simultaneously discussing the benefits and risks that come with doing so in an unscripted medium like a stream. Providing an immediate way for streamers or chat moderators to link resources related to mental health, such as through a panel extension³, could also benefit these streamers.

This study attracted participants who were interested in discussing mental health; many were open and willing to discuss this personal topic which may not be representative of the average viewer. As such, future research could explore the perceptions of those who are not as open to discussions about mental health. Researchers could explore why some streamers feel more comfortable discussing mental health among other personal information on platforms such as Instagram or Twitter as opposed to Twitch. One aspect to consider would be how the live aspect of Twitch impacts such conversations, and what are some differences in on-stream versus off-stream conversations. However, the audience could also be something to take into account. If the makeup of the audience on Twitch consists of weaker or stronger ties than on other social media platforms, that could also potentially affect streamers’ desire to disclose intimate information[2]. Future studies could also explore the difference in conversations about mental health from streamers who are more active in the esports community versus casual gaming.

5 CONCLUSION

Gaming has become a progressively more social activity as streaming has been integrated into the gaming community. Especially for streamers who tend to focus on slower-paced games, the interaction between a streamer and their viewers has led to conversations that tend toward sensitive subjects like mental health. We found that the type of game being streamed plays a key role in influencing how these discussions initiate and what types of expectations viewers hold for the stream’s content. Providing new resources to amateur streamers could help circumvent some of the limitations from games less conducive to intimate conversations and better connect streamers with their viewers.

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²Creator Camp is a program developed by Twitch targeted towards new streamers in order to help them achieve “affiliate status”.

³Panel extensions are small applications a streamer can place under their stream.

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