

Understanding Rules in Live Streaming Micro Communities on Twitch

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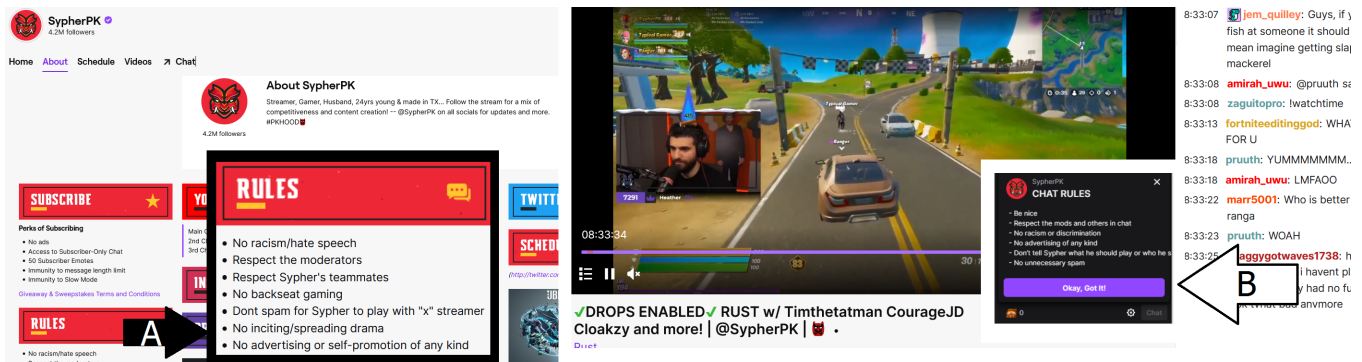


Figure 1: These are screenshots from the channel of popular streamer SypherPK. Left (A), is the "about" page for the streamer's channel, which has a section for rules. Right (B) is a screenshot of when a stream is happening. When a user tries to type in the channel's chat for the first time, a pop-up window will appear with "chat rules".

ABSTRACT

Rules and norms are critical to community governance. Live streaming communities like Twitch consist of thousands of micro-communities called channels. We conducted two studies to understand the micro-community rules. Study one suggests that Twitch users perceive that both rules transparency and communication frequency matter to channel vibe and frequency of harassment. Study two finds that the most popular channels have no channel or chat rules; among these having rules, rules encouraged by streamers are prominent. We explain why this may happen and how this contributes to community moderation and future research.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in HCI.

KEYWORDS

live streaming; community moderation; interactive media; content of rules; transparency

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1 INTRODUCTION

Negative content is rampant on the internet and can range from hate speech such as racism and sexism [3], to trolling, flaming, spamming, and "flooding" messages that disrupt users' experience [9]. Reducing unwanted behaviors is important because of the various negative health outcomes, such as depressive symptoms, anxiety, loneliness, somatic complaints, or suicidal behaviors [1, 13]. The negative behavior online also has contagious effects as users are likely to imitate each other. Effective regulation of negative content is one of the key factors that make online communities successful [8]. Among the factors (laws, norms, markets, and technology) that regulate behavior online, rules and norms are important to maintain civility in online spaces [10]. For example, Matias found that announcements of community rules increase the chance of rule compliance and newcomer participation [12]; Jhaver et al. found that offering explanations after content removal increases the likelihood of user engagement again in the future [7]. Rules are enforced through moderation systems. However, many moderation systems often lack transparency and cause negative impacts on users such as dropout of the community and feeling of frustration [7, 11].

Twitch is a live streaming platform that has affordances of simultaneity and authenticity [6]. Streamers create authentic real-time content via face cam to attract users (viewers) coming together to form micro-communities [5, 6, 15] while viewers can comment on the broadcast and communicate with each other and steamer via text chat. In order to regulate the chat room, Twitch employs a two-tier rule structure: the universal community guideline that is

made by the platform and applies to all the users on the platform, and the channel and chat rules developed by both the streamer and moderators for each micro-community that only applies to the specific channel [14]. As Twitch is comprised of millions of channels, rules vary throughout the site. While understanding the rules can potentially benefit the stakeholders (streamer, moderators, and viewers) in the micro-communities such as growing the micro-community effectively, mitigating conflict between moderators and viewers, and engaging viewer participation, little is known about how the clarity of rules affects negativity in this context. Thus, we asked:

- RQ1: What is the relationship between clarity of rules and the perceived vibe of a micro-community?
- RQ2: What are streamers putting into the content of micro-community rules?

2 STUDY 1

This first study aimed to see if there was a relationship between users' perceived clarity of the community rules and how toxic or positive they believed the community to be. In terms of the vibe, we were interested in the relationships between: a) rules transparency, b) rules communication frequency, c) frequency of harassment happening in the community, and d) perceived atmosphere or ambience of the channel as communicated to and felt by viewers (channel vibe).

2.1 Methods

2.1.1 Participant Recruitment. We designed a one-page paper survey that asked questions about users' favorite Twitch channel, the vibe of that channel, and clarity of the rules. This study was approved by the IRB. The survey data was collected during TwitchCon 2019, an annual live streaming convention for Twitch stakeholders that is hosted by Twitch. We distributed a paper survey to attendees and collected 525 responses. Results from the paper surveys were then manually put into the online survey platform by research assistants for digital archiving and further analysis. The average age of our participants was 26 ($SD=6.44$), ranging from 13 to 55 years old, and mostly male (71.6%). Most of the participants self-identified as White (53.1%), followed by Asian (19.4%), Latino (10.5%), Black (3.8%), Mixed (2.5%), Pacific Islander (1.1%), and others (4.6%).

2.1.2 Survey Measures. In the survey, we developed items from interview studies with volunteer moderators and streamers on Twitch from other projects. Channel vibe indicated the degree of the atmosphere and toxicity ($M=4.06$, $SD=.57$, $\alpha=.74$). A higher score indicates a more positive channel vibe with less toxicity. Rules transparency measured the degree of rule communication and delivery to the users/viewers ($M=4.35$, $MD=.60$, $\alpha=.75$). These two variables are measured with a 5-point Likert Scale.

Rules communication frequency ($M=2.71$, $SD=.59$, $\alpha=.70$) measures how often the rules are posted or orally communicated, and harassment frequency ($M=2.46$, $SD=.69$, $\alpha=.80$) measures how often users/viewers break the rules and harassment others. These two variables are measured with a 4-point scale. Items are shown in Appendix A.

2.2 Results

A Pearson's correlation analysis in Table 1 showed that rules transparency was positively associated with rules communication frequency ($r=.31$, $n=519$, $p<.001$) and channel vibe ($r=.49$, $n=520$, $p<.001$), but negatively associated with harassment frequency ($r=-.17$, $n=519$, $p<.001$). Rules communication frequency was positively associated with both harassment frequency ($r=.15$, $n=521$, $p=.001$) and channel vibe ($r=.14$, $n=519$, $p=.002$). Harassment frequency was negatively associated channel vibe ($r=-.48$, $n=519$, $p<.001$).

3 STUDY 2

We found that clarity of rules and the frequency of communicating them are associated with lower negativity and higher channel vibe. Nevertheless, little is known about what is included in the rules. In this study, we select the top 125 channels on TwitchMetrics.net¹ and examined details of the micro-community rules, specifically, the channel rule and chat rule as shown in Figure 1. The selection process is detailed in Appendix B.

3.1 Methods

Among the 125 channels on the data set, 83 limited use of their chat room to followers only (about 66.4 %) and 15 limited use of their chat to subscribers (those who donated to Twitch Partners and Affiliates monthly either through Twitch Prime or direct payment) only. 15 channels did not place such measures on their chat rooms, and allowed access to any user, regardless of whether they follow or subscribe to the streamer. Other descriptive statistics were summarized in Table 2.

An analysis of the rules was conducted for both chat rules and channel rules on the data set. Each chat and channel rule was first individually examined, and notes were taken of the topics that were discussed (i.e., which behaviors were not allowed by the streamer). Once every chat and channel rule was accounted for, we evaluated the findings in a series of weekly meetings, where we created up to 40 qualitative codes based on the notes taken from each rule; these would become our subcategories. Once these were created and defined, we then coded each chat and channel rule on the data set using these new categories. After every rule on the data set was successfully coded, we evaluated the metrics again, discussing possible ways to further classify them into high-level themes. From this evaluation, we were able to create nine themes, all of which would become our resulting categories for this study. All the categories and subcategories with descriptions are summarized in Appendix B. With these nine themes created, we returned to the data set and coded each rule based on the forty codes that we had created beforehand and conducted basic frequencies to determine how many channels made up each category.

3.2 Results

Table 2 showed many micro-communities did not have rules. Among these having rules, more had chat rules than channel rules. Channel rules were generally longer than chat rules. More rules used restrictive than prescriptive language.

¹<https://www.twitchmetrics.net/>

Table 1: Correlation Analysis

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Rules transparency (1)	1			
Rules communication frequency (2)	.31**	1		
Harassment frequency (3)	-.17**	.15**	1	
Channel vibe (4)	.49**	.14**	-.48**	1

** indicates that correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of the 125 Micro-communities/Channels

	Chat Rules	Channel Rules	Note
125 channels	N= 47	N= 24	having chat rules or channel rules is independent
Length of characters in the rules	M= 148.96, SD= 139.42	M= 341.71, SD= 498.89	
Prescriptive language	N= 34	N= 17	having prescriptive or restrictive rules
Restrictive language	N= 36	N= 22	is independent

3.2.1 Controversial Topics (N=7 (chat), 5 (channel)). This category includes channels with rules that make references to topics that are considered to be controversial, such as drugs, politics, religion, and health. Rules that specifically include the phrase "controversial topics" or similar are also included. A streamer that did not allow any sort of controversial discussion would have posted something like "No drug discussion of any kind. No politics" or "No Politics or Religion talk" as part of their chat rules. They could also have specifically referenced all "controversial topics" as a whole by giving a rule such as "All controversial topics are not appropriate here".

3.2.2 Not Safe For Work (NSFW) (N=0 (chat), 1 (channel)). This category includes channel with rules that make references to topics that would be described as inappropriate or offensive in a controlled environment (such as a workplace); examples of such topics included nudity/pornography, graphic content, blood, and/or gore. For example, a streamer on Twitch that did not allow any pornographic content would have posted a rule such as "No pornography, no links to pornography, obscene or nude images including hentai and cartoons/animations" on their channels.

3.2.3 Treatment of Other Users (N=22 (chat), 17 (channel)). This category includes channels with rules that pertain to the specific behavior of a user towards other users not relating to the streamer themselves. Such behaviors include (but are not limited to) racism, sexism, homophobia/transphobia, mentioning or sharing personal information (or "doxxing"), making malicious threats that suggest harm to individuals/groups, extortion, stalking, bullying, and pressuring other users. For example, a specific streamer that did not allow racist comments would include a rule such as "No nationalism/racism" on their chat.

3.2.4 Treatment of Streamer (N=7 (chat), 8 (channel)). This category includes channels with rules that focus on the specific behavior of a user towards the streamer themselves, such as asking the streamer to perform certain tasks (i.e., playing certain games) and telling the streamer where to go/what to do in a game while streaming, also

known as backseating. For example, a streamer that did not allow users to request to play a specific title or tell them to do a certain action would post rules such as "Don't tell [name of streamer] who he should play with" on their chats or "Don't recommend/request other titles while we're playing a game or tell the broadcaster what to do unless requested" on their channels; a streamer that did not allow users to backseat would post a rule such as "Keep it easy on backseat gaming (telling the streamer where to go/what to do)".

3.2.5 Using Stream/Chat (N=12 (chat), 13 (channel)). This category includes channels containing rules that focus on the use of the stream or chat functions by a specific user. Examples of such uses include lurking, spamming, advertising towards 3rd parties, or posting spoilers and/or external links on chat. For example, a streamer that did not allow any sort of spamming would have posted a rule such as "No general spam or spam encouragement" on their chat; similarly, a streamer that did not allow any advertisements of other Twitch channels on their chats would post a rule such as "No self-advertising/advertising other channels" on their channels.

3.2.6 Relating to Self (N=15 (chat), 10 (channel)). This category includes channels with rules that focus a user's behavior towards themselves that could affect others, such as impersonating somebody other than their proper identity or behavior that is disruptive to the stream or towards other people. For example, a streamer that specifically does not allow any form of impersonation of other Twitch channels by their viewers would have posted a rule such as "Creating multiple fake...Twitch accounts to gain any advantage in the chat will result in being banned..." or specifically mention the act of "impersonation" by saying "Please refrain from...impersonation"; a streamer that did not allow any obnoxious behavior would typically be varied in what they specifically say in their rules regarding this, and therefore would post rules such as "don't be obnoxious", "don't be dick", or "don't be a psycho"; regardless, streamers would fall into this category if the context points to the disruptive behavior as defined above.

3.2.7 Encouraged by Streamer ($N=29$ (chat), 15 (channel)). This category includes channels with rules where the streamer encourages a certain action or activity to the streamer, such as subscribing to them, another account, or another source (i.e., Twitch Prime), listening to a certain individual or party (i.e., *"Listen to the moderators"*), following another account from any platform (i.e., Instagram, Snapchat, Twitch), referring to any third party for any sort of information, being inclusive, treating a certain individual or party with respect or kindness, or simply enjoying the stream. For example, a streamer that would have wanted to encourage their viewers to be respectful would post a rule such as *"Be nice. No arguing or name calling,"* or *"Please respect everybody in the chat."* Conversely, a streamer that encouraged the act of being inclusive would have posted a rule like *"Include everyone"*. Streamers also posted rules that encourage enjoyment, such as *"...enjoy the stream"* and *"Have FUN"*.

3.2.8 Regulating Chat ($N=13$ (chat), 9 (channel)). This category includes channels with rules focusing specifically on typing messages on the chat, such as regulations based on the use of curse/bad words, profanity, flaming, etc., using the English language on chat (or using other languages), or the formatting to be used when typing in chat (i.e., *"no emojis"*, *"no ASCII"*, *"one line messages only"*, *"no walls of text"*, etc.). For example, a streamer that did not allow profanity would have posted a rule such as *"Watch your language... there could be someone from the 'younger generation' watching so please be mindful of that"*, while a streamer that only allowed English to be used on their chat would give a rule such as *"English only"*.

3.2.9 Consequences ($N=6$ (chat), 5 (channel)). This is a special category created for channels that explain any sort of consequences for violating the rules posted onto either their channel or chat rules. Some examples of rules on the data set include: *"NO GAME SUGGESTIONS. Just don't. You will get banned if you do so don't be surprised"*, *"One Rule, don't be an idiot. pretty simple. Have some etiquette. If you don't, it is really easy to get banned"*, and *"Racism, sexism, or discrimination of any kind will result in a permanent chat ban"*.

4 DISCUSSION

The first study indicates that, as mods and streamers frequently post and explain rules, perceived transparency tends to increase. The perceived transparency and vibe are relatively high ($M_s > 4$, which means "agree") on Twitch. In a more transparent channel, viewers feel the channel more supportive and enjoyable.

As harmful content increases in the channel, the vibe tends to decrease; as rules communication frequency increases, channel vibe increases; and as the negative content increases, frequency to communicate rules tends to increase. Such results indicate the design opportunity and necessity to increase the visibility of chat and channel rules in a real-time context such as sticking a rule box on the top of the chatroom or displaying rules in the broadcasting screen periodically. These design implications also raise other interesting questions. For example, if we increase the visibility of chat and channel rules, should we still frequently communicate and explain rules? Is it still important to do so? Future research can explore whether the increased visibility of rules will affect rules' communication

frequency. In addition, since many channels have no clear rules, mods and streamers also heavily rely on rule communication and explanation to regulate viewers' behaviors, indicating the design opportunities to facilitate rule communication delivery. Though we found that such communication frequency is critically associated with transparency, channel vibe, and harassment frequency, we don't know how these rules are being communicated and what the communication looks like. How to improve rule communication efficacy from the streamer and mod's perspective and mitigate their cognitive load needs further investigation. For example, can using bots to post rule effectively reduce the human labor of mods and streamers, according to prior work [2] showing that mods and streamers apply various bots to facilitate moderation? Which role is more significant to rule communication efficacy among bots, mods, and the streamer?

The second study reveals that popular micro-communities have more chat rules than channel rules, partially supporting the visibility because chat rules automatically pop up once newcomers join the chatroom, and channel rules are buried by the tons of information under the broadcasting screen on the homepage. Prior work shows that community size is not a good predictor of whether it has rules but it is more likely to have rules if the community has a higher popularity rank according to the overall activity level (e.g., subscribers and posts) [4]. Surprisingly, we found that most top popular channels have no chat or channel rules. Possibly, the simultaneity and ephemerality of live streaming make the community size a complex factor, not only the followers, subscribers, and active viewers with comments in the chat, but also random viewers who just lurk and watch. We don't know whether community size is a good predictor of absence or presence of rules in these popular channels, questions need further investigation. Additionally, most apply follower-only chat mode, an indicator of interest to the micro-community. Is there a relationship between the chat mode and the existence of rules?

Among the channels having rules, the categories show that live streaming micro-communities have more restrictive ('Don't do this') than prescriptive ('Do this') types of rules, consistent with Fiesler et al.'s work of Reddit [4]. In addition, the unique categories are rules related to the streamer instead of general other users. The most prominent category is something encouraged by the streamer. In live streaming micro-communities, streamers are key roles in the governance structure and own the authority to make the final decision about moderation and rule development [14, 15]. The rules that are encouraged by the streamer may dictate the values of the micro-communities.

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A APPENDIX A: STUDY 1 SURVEY MEASURES

Think about your favorite streamer and their channel. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree on the following statements (1= Strongly disagree, 5= Strongly agree).

Channel vibe

- I enjoy the vibe of the channel.
- I feel close to other viewers in the channel.
- Reading the chat is a lot of fun.
- The channel is very supportive.
- People follow the channel rules.
- I see a lot of rude things being said in chat (reverse coded).
- The channel is pretty toxic (reverse coded).

Rules transparency

- The rules in the channel are clearly stated.

I know what is okay to say in chat.

The moderation criteria is clear to me.

Streamer is clear about what is allowed in chat.

Think about your favorite streamer and their channel. Please indicate how often you see the following activities in chat (1= Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4= Frequently).

Rules communication frequency

- Moderators posting rules in chat.
- Mods explaining and educating harassers.
- Mods asking viewers to report certain people.
- Streamer talking about what is appropriate.
- Streamer discussing the channel rule.
- Mods talking in chat removed (removed after reliability test).
- Streamer scolding harassers (removed after reliability test).

Harassment frequency

- Comments that I think should be deleted but are not.
- People posting rude things in chat.
- People harassing other viewers.
- People harassing the streamer.

B APPENDIX B: STUDY 2 DATA COLLECTION PROCESS AND CODING

B.1 Data Collection Criteria

For this study, we selected the top 200 most popular streamers on Twitch as defined by TwitchMetrics.net, a site dedicated to tracking and providing meaningful analytics about Twitch activity. The channels were selected on March 30, 2020, and we define "popular" here as defined by TwitchMetrics.net: the average concurrent viewers over the past 15 streams on March 30, 2020. Among these 200 streamers, we selected our data set based on the following criteria: (1) channel must be in English, (2) channel must have been active within 2 months of the data collection, (3) channel must not be of professional esports (ie. OverwatchLeague, ESPORTSFIFA), and (4) channel must not be owned by a particular game or company (ie., PlayOverwatch, Fortnite, Nintendo, TwitchRivals). The purpose of the final two criteria was to streamline our focus towards primarily individual Twitch content creators and their communities.

Among these 200 channels, 125 passed our criteria, from which we collected the following data: whether or not there were chat restrictions (Such as if accessing chats were limited to only those who subscribed or those who follow the streamer), whether or not there were rules posted on either the channel homepage (defined as "channel rules") or on the chat log (defined as "chat rules" – see [Figure 1](#)), the text of any chat or channel rules found, whether the rules posted had prescriptive (encouraging) or restrictive (discouraging) language, and the length of the rules as a whole (by character).

B.2 Coding Process

Full Table: Rule Categories and Subcategories with Description is in Below Page

Categories	Subcategories	Description
Controversial Topics	Drugs	if rules contained references to drugs
	Politics	politics or political speech
	Religion	religion
	Health	individual health/health conditions, such as autism, cancer, depression, mental health, suicide, etc.
Not Safe For Work (NSFW)	Nudity	anything related to nudity/pornography
	Graphic/Gore	graphic content/blood and gore
Treatment of Other Users	Hate	general comments related to hate towards other groups, streamers, people, etc. (only used specifically if the term hate or discrimination is used)
	Racism	discrimination on the basis of race
	Sexism	discrimination on the basis of sex
	Homo/Transphobia	discrimination on the basis of sexual/gender identity
	Personal Info	mentioning or sharing personal information (also known as doxxing)
	Threats	Making malicious statements that suggest harm to individuals/groups
	Extortion/Solicitation	extortion or solicitation (attempting to obtain something from someone)
	Stalking	stalking
	Bullying	bullying or harassment
Treatment of Streamer	Pressuring	the persuasion or coercion to do something
	Requests	asking the streamer to perform certain tasks (ie. play certain games)
Using Stream/Chat	Backseating	backseating (telling the streamer where to go/what to do)
	Lurking	viewers who are watching, but may not be chatting, have the stream or browser tab muted, or may be watching a handful of streams at one time (from the Twitch Support website)
	Spamming	if anything related to spamming (sending or posting unsolicited messages) is mentioned/discussed
	Advertising	advertisements towards 3rd parties (ie. other Twitch channels, companies, etc.)
	Spoilers	posting spoilers on chat
Relating to Self	Posting Links	posting external links on chat
	Self-Promotion	advertisements/promotions towards the poster themselves
	Impersonation	impersonation/pretending to be someone else
Encouraged by Streamer	Obnoxious	acting in a way that is disruptive to the stream or towards other people
	Subscribe	If the streamer tells the viewer to subscribe to them, another account, or to another source
	Listen	if the streamer tells the viewer to listen to a certain individual or party
	Follow	if the streamer asks to follow another account from any platform
	Refer	if the streamer asks the viewer to refer to another page for any type of information
	Inclusion	if the streamer encourages the viewer to be inclusive/include others
	Respect	if the streamer asks the viewer to treat a certain individual or party with respect or kindness
Regulating Chat	Enjoy	if the streamer encourages the viewer to “have fun”, enjoy the stream, etc.
	Language	Either if (1) the streamer refers to using bad words/curse words, flaming, profanity, etc. or (2) if the streamer posts rule(s) specifically aimed at the English language (or using other languages)
Consequences	Formatting	if rules specify some formatting to be used when typing in chat
	N/A	if the streamer explains consequences for breaking any of their posted rules