

Chapter 17

Online Community Bonds as a Method of Mitigating Toxicity in an Interactive Livestream

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ABSTRACT

Toxicity—aggressive, discriminatory, or hostile behavior that impacts a group or community—is a significant issue on the livestreaming platform Twitch, where a single toxic utterance can disrupt the dynamic between a streamer and their fans. This chapter examines the ways in which a female Twitch streamer combats issues of toxicity by creating and supporting a fan community that is heavily invested in her and therefore endeavors to conform to the norms and regulations of her community. Through the analysis of a single two-hour stream, this chapter considers the ways in which a streamer can balance the appearance of a close relationship with her community with a high level of moderation and regulation to resist toxic behavior and thus ensure her and her fan community's well-being and happiness.

INTRODUCTION

The shift towards crowdsourced media, such as YouTube, Reddit, and Tumblr, has led to the creation of devout fan communities who participate and shape the culture surrounding content creators. One of the most popular examples of crowdsourced media is Twitch.tv (hereafter known as Twitch), which allows individuals to broadcast their content live to viewers who tune in and participate via a synchronous chat system. The interactive nature of Twitch combined with the increasingly diverse genres of livestreams available on the platform have made livestreaming a new genre of entertainment on its own (Kaytoue, et al., 2012), with devout transnational fan communities developing around popular streamers. These communities are grounded in self-disclosure and self-presentation, as streamers talk directly to their audiences, often engage in casual conversations with viewers participating in chat, and are typically more willing to share details about their personal lives than traditional public figures. The personal nature of

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these interactions creates a *perceived interconnectedness* (Abidin, 2015) – a feeling of connectedness or intimacy felt by the fans, regardless of whether the intimacy of these interaction is ‘authentic.’

As the number of streamers and viewers on Twitch has continued to grow, however, so has another issue: toxicity. Defined as aggressive, hostile, or sometimes even threatening behavior, often directed at individuals who do not conform to the norms of a space (Gray, 2012), toxicity impacts everyone involved, as a single instance of toxic behavior disrupts the community dynamic and may have long-lasting effects, on the group. In the case of Twitch, toxic behavior in a streamer’s chat – regardless of to whom it is directed – interrupts the flow of the livestream and the dynamic between the streamer and their fan community. Because Twitch evolved out of an interest in video game spectatorship, and video game culture is burdened by the cishet (cisgender heterosexual) white male gamer stereotype (Shaw, 2012), Twitch users who do not fit this identity category (e.g., women, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, etc.) are labeled as threats to the perceived homogeneity of video game (and Twitch) culture.

This chapter analyzes a popular cishet white American female Twitch streamer’s regularly scheduled weekend stream to explore the role of fan community attachment in the mitigation of toxic behavior. Utilizing thematic coding grounded in ethnographic perspectives, this case study examines how one streamer (“Maggie”) has responded to two narratives that have developed regarding the Twitch platform: (1) livestreaming communities are generally toxic, hostile spaces and (2) streamers who do not conform to the gamer stereotype are delegitimized and often objectified and harassed in these spaces. This mixed-methods approach examines a narrow data set – one streamer and the viewers participating in her chatroom in the course of a single, two-hour stream – to emphasize the intricacies of the streamer-fan community dynamic, underscoring methods of resisting toxic discourses and the role of community norms in the production and acceptance of toxic discourse. Through the creation of a fan community grounded in inclusivity and acceptance, Maggie is able to limit the amount of toxicity in her fan community. Although her actions are clearly informed by an awareness of the potential for toxic behavior on Twitch, her community-building efforts have resulted in the establishment of a fan community that is heavily invested in her and therefore endeavors to conform to the norms and regulations of her community. Thus, although toxicity remains a powerful and immanent threat for many on Twitch, this study reveals the ways in which streamers can challenge toxic discourses by embedding norms and methods of regulation that prohibit such behavior into their fan communities.

To best explore methods of online community-building and this steamer’s performance on Twitch, this chapter first provides a brief overview of Twitch’s platform to contextualize the analysis. The case study site is then detailed, followed by a brief discussion of the theoretical and methodological framework. The majority of the theoretical context, however, is interlaced with the discussion of data to allow for a more grounded contextualization of the data within the numerous theoretical spaces in which it falls. This chapter closes with a discussion of the implications of this analysis for Twitch streamers and the streaming industry more broadly and suggestions for future research on this topic.

WHAT IS TWITCH?

Created in 2011 and now a subsidiary of Amazon, Twitch is “the first major platform to employ user generated live video streaming” (Deng, et al., 2017) and is primarily utilized to stream (broadcast in real-time) video game content, including eSports (electronic sports) competitions. However, the site also welcomes creative and IRL (real life) streamers, who broadcast their artistic endeavors, such as pottery,

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