

Analyzing the Effects of Parasocial Relations on Live Streamers

Ella Vu

Title: Analyzing the Effects of Parasocial Relations on Live Streamers

Response to Viewers:

Dear Reader,

After having my grant proposal reviewed, I've received much feedback. Three primary concerns were: incorporating mental health evaluations from participants during the study, including community resources for participants after the study, and determining which specific measures of study will affect the outcome. All of these issues will be addressed in the "Preliminary/Basic Plan of Study" portion of this final proposal as I noticed that they relate to improving the execution of data collection and participant experience. There, I will be more specific in measuring participant data and providing resources for participants.

For this grant proposal assignment, I think I did well with showcasing a topic that is becoming more prevalent (Parasocial Relations). If done again, I wish I could have another try on addressing parasocial relations in mainstream media and not just streamers.

Sincerely,
Ella Vu

Background and Significance:

In an era of mass media and online platforms, people across the world can be up to date on what their favorite celebrities have been up to, whether it be hobbies, dating life, likes, or dislikes. Meanwhile, such celebrities are unaware of the personal lives of their own audience. This one-sided bond is known as a parasocial relationship (PSR) (Xu et al., 2023). Moreover, with an increased popularity in live streaming over the years, PSRs have also increased. With technology such as chat rooms like Discord, social media, and live content, viewers now have greater access to micro-celebrities such as streamers. In turn, this has created the chance for streamers to interact with their viewers, and communication can become reciprocal (Kowert & Daniel Jr, 2021).

However during the COVID Pandemic, streamers had noticed an upturn of viewers sharing their emotional and financial struggles within live Twitch chats and Discord channels, and despite streamers stating feelings of not being their audience's therapists, many streamers had felt a sense of responsibility for conserving the mental health of their viewers during streams (Dunlap, Shanley, & Wagner, 2023).

While a streamer's inclination towards discussing mental health can influence the frequency of mental health discussions in their streams (LaMastra et al. 2020), and seeing streamers talk about struggles with depression can help reduce social stigmas around mental health (Lee, Yuan, & Wohn, 2021), streamers already have existing vulnerabilities to harassment because of the unique nature of live streaming (Uttraraopong, Cai, & Wohn, 2021).

With streamers facing a rise of PSRs and holding influence on perceptions of mental health within their community, we propose an assessment of streamer mental health in the form of a mobile game. In our study, we aim to analyze the negative and positive effects of PSRs on streamers based on the degree of how responsible they feel for the well-being of their audience via a video game. Based on the player's choices, we hypothesize that some streamers may feel

more pressure or reliant on their audience, whilst others may feel supported or less personalized.

Preliminary/Basic Plan of Study

We will release the game to 30 participants diverse in audience size because audience size will be the main independent variable when regarding levels of parasocial relations for this new study. However, to keep a diverse sample population, participants will also be diverse in age, types of content created, and streaming experience. Diversity will less likely skew the data of the study. This EMA study will be designed in bite-sized gameplay inspired by Duolingo's language lessons (Duolingo, n.d.), and the duration will be for 3 days with hourly assessments while streaming. An EMA study will help record data of how streamers feel towards their viewers in real time, and a video game format will provide hypothetical scenarios for streamers to choose based on how they feel at the time.

During assessment, streamers would choose from options that best align with their current feelings towards their audience and stream. The measure of outcome will be streamers' level of reciprocity, influence, reliance, and responsibility (1 to 5, 1 being none and 5 being high) towards their audience. Because measuring "parasocial relations" has yet to be standardized, these measures were created to relate to factors of a parasocial relationship and together can determine how "parasocial" a streamer may feel.

To account for streamer mental health, options to include additional information will be included during the EMA where streamers can write about their stress and anxiety levels. Moreover, after the study, streamers will have the option to interact with other streamers in a supportive community.

Given the nature of an EMA study, some concerns include if a participant will be able to complete assessments in time and to make sure they are doing so. Alternative measures to address this issue are to have notifications in place and a flexible submission window that will allow streamers to catch-up on EMA entries. Moreover, since streamers will only take this assessment while they're streaming, they are already monitored in live time.

Innovation/Impact

This study is novel in that it will approach data collection in the form of an EMA video game, and it will explore a type of parasocial relation where streamers interact with viewers. With PSRs on the rise, this study has the potential to show how a celebrity's influence can impact a social sphere, and it can provide more attention to an emerging concern of content-creator mental health and wellness. This study will also contribute to the development of creative innovations made at the intersections of technology with game design and mental health with sociology.

Reference

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