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## Twitch – Analysis of a medium of communication

### Abstract

This essay aims to provide a brief description about the video live streaming service platform Twitch. An analysis of the communicative properties of Twitch will be followed by a description of the widespread adoption of emotes on the platform. Crystal's seven features formal properties of speech and writing provide a basis of comparison for the Twitch's digitally mediated communication. Lastly, Twitch's impact on society, as well as its ability to give new impetus to other subcultures will be discussed.

### 1. Introduction

At a glance, Twitch can be described as providing a "User-generated live video streaming" service (Pires & Simon 2015). Currently owned by Amazon, Twitch focuses on video game live streaming, as evidenced by the countless categories of games that one can browse through. In addition, they have recently expanded their categories to include music broadcasts, creative content creation and "in real life" streams.



Figure 1. Market share of Twitch by Yosilewitz. A.

Figure 1 shows Twitch's market share in the past 2 years. Twitch has nearly a monopoly on live video game streaming services.

With burgeoning net penetration worldwide, live streaming services had gained popularity for its ease of access. Improvements in gaming hardware have lowered the requirements for anyone with relatively capable hardware to be able to stream. On the other hand, viewers gravitate towards its platform because of its monopoly status in the service. Upon closer inspection, beside the central function of Twitch as a viewing platform, Twitch offers a unique ability to spur social interaction through a real time chat box.

Communication is primarily examined through the viewers' responses in the chatbox. Henceforth, viewers will be referred to as "chat".

## **2. Summary of relevant literature**

Many recent studies have been conducted on the seemingly chaotic communication practices among thousands of people that are actively viewing streams. For instance, owing to the massive scale and quick pace of messages, it is asserted that such communication does not follow patterns previously described in computer-mediated communication studies. Ford, Gardner, Horgan, Liu, Tsaasan, Nardi & Rickman (2017 p. 858) go on to posit the emergence of crowdspeak. Instead of a situation which is chaotic, and illegible to readers, Ford et al (2017 p. 856) argue for "practices of coherence" to the many participants.

Hope (2019, p.30) characterizes chatting on Twitch as being synchronous and an exercise in understanding computer mediated communication. What is most striking about Twitch chat is the copious and liberal use of emotes to convey meaning. In other words, multiple domains of language are required to examine these image-word utterances. Twitch provides a unique opportunity to scrutinize an emerging language used by many on a daily basis due to its ability to store Videos On Demand (VODs) of the livestream. The streamer's responses to the chat and vice versa can be compared in real time.

Kim, Park, Song, Park and Cha (p.6) established a correlation between the use of Ngrams corresponding to emotes as predictors of popularity among streamers. In essence, abundant use of popular emotes that are a function of an individual's emotion in response to what is happening on the livestream is a strong predictor of future popularity, as opposed to say interpersonal communication between participants in the chat (usually associated with the @ function).

These 3 studies highlight the unique standing of Twitch as a marketplace to examine computer mediated communication through identifying traits in which the language in chat differs from traditional computer mediated communication.

### 3. Characteristics of Twitch Chat

As previously mentioned, there is an excessive focus on the use of emotes interspersed among words. Emotes can, on occasion, convey audience sentiment without the use of words at all. Besides the stock emotes that Twitch has developed, there is an add-on, Better Twitch TV (BTTV), that adds moving emotes. It can be considered an expansion pack, in gamer speak, to the existing list of emotes. Expanding on the idea of crowdspeak identified before, we can consider crowdspeak, e.g. the constant repetition of a particular emote, to be akin to a live audience cheering, clapping or booing. As the number of people grows, meaningful conversation between individuals begins to cease and is overtaken by interactions between the streamer and the collective identity known as chat. There comes a tipping point where the streamer has to address chat as a whole, instead of responding to individuals, much like an artist holding a concert who has to respond to the mood of the crowd.

Nevertheless, viewers in the chat of streamers that have a viewer count beneath or between one to three thousand can still manageably interact with the streamer through donations and highlighted messages.

The use of emotes can vary within specific game communities too. Despite most emotes having general connotations or meanings attached to them, these meanings can come to vary among different game communities. For instance, the emote DansGame is used by the Defence of the Ancients 2 (DOTA2) community to specifically refer to a particular streamer (AdmiralBulldog) due to their visual similarity. In other communities, DansGame is used as an emote to represent anger or disgust.

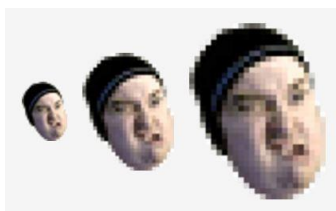


Figure 2. DansGame emote



Figure 3. AdmiralBulldog.

The adoption of emotes by communities that use it to signify alternative referents can be analogous to the adoption of English by Outer Circle communities similar to the Three Circles Model suggested by Kachru (1982). Indeed, we can consider emotes as the lingua franca of all the chats on Twitch.

#### **4. Comparison of Twitch chat to other forum speak.**

Twitch chat emotes are typed as text into the viewer's chat box and converted to images when the message is sent. This gives the community an opportunity to incorporate it into their verbal dictionaries. However, the verbalization of emotes can only be corroborated anecdotally by members of the gaming community. While the community is burgeoning, no studies have surveyed the use of emotes as a part of an idiolect. Yet, with the strong following that the top streamers have, it is not unimaginable for their followers to incorporate regular emotes of their favourite streamers into their language, because it serves as an identity marker.

Internet forums such as reddit, 4chan and the prominent local forum HardwareZone, tend to create neologisms. These mostly include acronyms and alternative connotations to existing words. However, Twitch is unique in its arbitrariness as compared to extended meanings or shorthands that forums have invented.

#### **5. Relating Crystal's Seven Features to Twitch Chat (200**

**a.** In terms of synchrony, Twitch chat can both be time-bound and space-bound. It's time-bound during the livestream, for missed messages cannot be retrieved just by scrolling up after a period of time. However, while it's certain to whom some messages are addressed to, certain parts of crowdspeak might not be concerned with getting a message across to a particular person, but contributing to the overall atmosphere and mood.

Conversely, once the streamer ends their livestream and the VOD uploaded, anyone can access the streamer's past VODs should they make it available to the public.

Once there, the messages appear chronologically, and individuals who are interested in the flow of chat and its contents can skip to the relevant timestamp and appraise it. This way, it fulfills the requirements of being space-bound.

**b.** On the continuum of spontaneity, most messages lean towards being more spontaneous rather than contrived. Individual conversations between the streamer and chat can occur in streamers with little viewers. In those cases, a genuine conversation, assuming that chat replies at equal speeds as the streamer, can be considered more spontaneous than contrived, like a face to face conversation that goes back and forth. In streams where the message count far exceeds what the

streamer can reasonably process, due to high viewer count, chat knows that their message will move too quickly for the viewer to take notice. Though there are functions that can bring a contrived message to the streamer's attention, such as through highlights or donations, chat generally thrives on loose constructions and repetitive emotes.

- c. Chat is most likely to be visually decontextualized due to aid of anonymity. Contextual clues are reduced to a minimum and most communication happens at face value. Also, the pace at which chat moves promotes loose linguistic structure and a lot of verbose. More often than not, words are omitted in favor of emotes in order to capture the streamer's attention. Lengthy and complex sentence structures tend to get ignored or washed away due to the need for the streamer to accommodate the attentions of many.
- d. Besides the content, the social aspect of live streaming is where it is most appealing. Streamers can choose to establish a social relationship with chat as a whole, or individuals within the chat. Many greetings are exchanged as people enter and leave chat. More often than not, individuals in the chat send messages just to get noticed by their favourite streamer. Chats in live streams most definitely fulfill a social function and is considerably less concerned with being factually communicative.
- e. Utterances cannot be taken back barring a moderator's intervention, e.g. timing a particular individual out or banning the use of certain words or phrases. In chat, everyone is actively trying to "speak over each other" to vie for the streamer's attention. This satisfies the Crystal's description (2006, p.234) of texts being immediately revisable.
- f. Lastly, all forms of prosody are absent in chat, saving text to speech donations. However, those are far and few between, and even text to speech is monotone. Most messages tend to be graphically rich, not only with punctuation, but also with peppered with emotes.

## 6. Conclusion

Twitch chat provides a new dimension of communication. As live streaming services become more and more popular through platforms such as Facebook and Youtube, communicative features of large audiences can be reasonably analyzed by collecting data. Twitch chat is distinctive and quirky with its copious use of emotes, but it is these very emotes that give life to the culture of Twitch. Additionally, subcultures are relatively obscure can find voices and unite under the same "Twitchspeak". Followers of

a famous streamer merge and discover group identity through crowdspeak. Twitch as a platform for communication transcends tradition and demonstrates new forms of digitally mediated communication.

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