Twitch: Livestreaming As a Medium of Communication

1. Introduction

Twitch is an online streaming platform dedicated to the live broadcasting of video games content. It sets itself apart from its competitors by offering opportunities for real-time interaction between streamers and audiences (Wingfield, 2016). According to Twitch's official blogpost (2017), 292 billion minutes of live viewership was generated by 2.2 million unique streamers in the year 2016 alone. Apart from user-generated broadcasts, Twitch also broadcasted major competitions and tournaments of competitive and formalised video gaming, also known as eSports, to millions of viewers simultaneously (Taylor, 2018).

2. Literature

Taylor (2018) suggested that the act of watching television is akin to watching a live video game stream, and quoted David Morley, who suggested that the act is not always "one-dimensional activity of equivalent meaning". He deduced that there are six key motivations behind the popularity of video game livestreams, namely "aspirational, educational, inspirational, entertainment, community, and ambience" (Taylor, 2018). He highlighted that community refers to the collective experience that brings the viewers and broadcasters together, bonded by their fandom for a game through a synchronous chat box which allows for mutual communication between the broadcasters and their viewers (Taylor, 2018).

In her paper, Herring (2007) discussed the importance of the classification and organisation of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and how a faceted classification scheme can support researchers in the analysis of a CMC discourse and compare it across other types of CMC discourse. She proposed that a CMC discourse should be categorised based on its technological features and social factor within the communicative context (Herring, 2007). A faceted classification for a scheme of Twitch based on Herring's propositions will be detailed in Section 8.

The topic of Internet discourse was discussed in Crystal's academic book (2006), in which he proposed the usage of a functional term 'Netspeak' to describe the variety of language use pertaining to the internet in which it differs from the use of languages outside of it. Contrary to the 'speak' morpheme in Crystal's term of choice, Netspeak is not just restricted to the spoken form only, it also entails online communication via the written format (Crystal, 2006). Crystal (2006) also acknowledged that several researchers have classified Netspeak as a written form of a spoken language although he deemed this view as problematic since it diminishes several salient features of spoken language. He then establishes the need to separate Netspeak in the form of a spoken and written format, and details seven differentiating factors between speaking and writing (Crystal, 2006). The seven features will be further discussed in relation to Twitch in Section 9 of this paper.

3. Properties of Twitch and its effects on communication

As previously mentioned by Taylor (2018), Twitch's chat box provides real-time communication between streamers and their audience. He added that the synchronous chat window enables streamers to keep track of their audience count and what they have typed (Taylor, 2018). Unlike the viewers who are only limited to communicating in the written format, streamers have the additional option of interacting with the audience via speech through a microphone.

Apart from conversations taking place in the chat window, Taylor (2018) also noted the use of Twitch-exclusive emoticons (also known as Twitch Emotes) as a symbolic form of communication on the platform. As described by the head of Twitch's data science team, Drew Harry explained how a chat window spammed with "excited exclamations, repetitive emoticons and memes' should be treated as meaningful interactions and it is comparable to the atmosphere at major sporting events (Taylor, 2018).

Additionally, Alexander (2018) noted that viewers can install an optional third-party browser extension, Better Twitch TV, to access additional emotes such as "MaN" and "EZ", which are only viewable by other users with the extension (See figure 3.1).
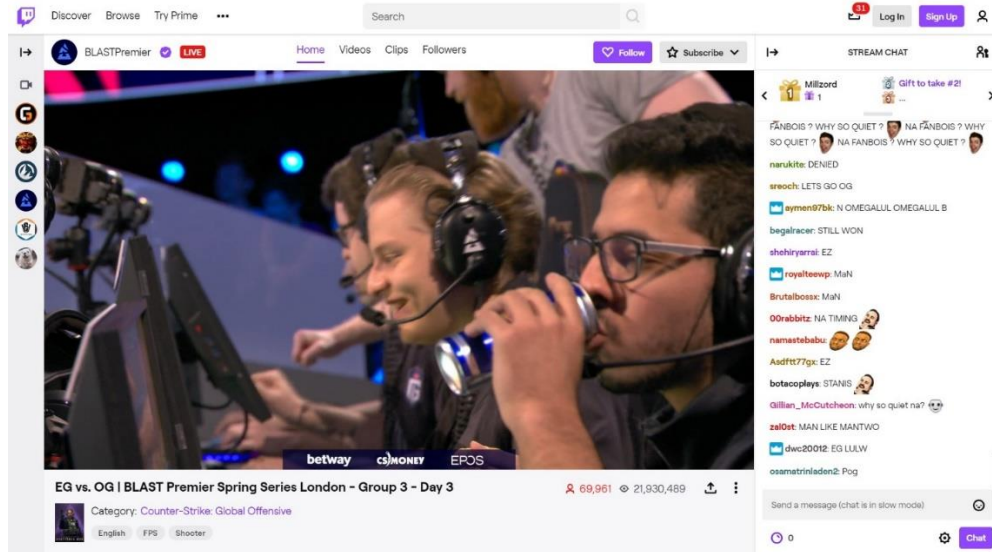
Fig 3.1 BLASTPremier Spring Series London, 2020. Screen capture of chat window spammed with Emotes during the broadcast of a Counter-Strike: Global Offensive competition. Several emotes such as "NaM", "OMEGALUL" and "EZ" appear in their text format without the Better Twitch TV extension.

According to Julia Alexander (2018), a large part of understanding how users communicate on the platform heavily relies on one's understanding of how Twitch Emotes function. Twitch Emotes appear in the chat window in replacement of text when a user types the case-sensitive input for the Twitch Emote.

'Kappa' is often compared to the face of Twitch and boasts a usage of over a million each day (Goldenberg, 2015). According to Goldenberg (2015), 'Kappa' originated from the inside joke of Twitch employees secretly inserting their own faces as emoticons. Josh DeSeno, who was then working on the chat client decided to include a greyscale version of his face (Goldenberg, 2015). The general usage of 'Kappa' on Twitch expresses sarcasm or playful mockery (Alexander, 2018; Goldenberg, 2015).

'TriHard', according to Kotaku Journalist Luke Winkie (2017), is one of the most prominent yet controversial Twitch Emote within the community as it often used to denigrate black people. The face of 'TriHard' belongs to Mychal Jefferson, who goes by the handle TriHex on Twitch. 'TriHard' is a play on the word 'tryhard', often used to describe a person who takes matters too seriously and is unnecessarily competitive (Winkie, 2017). As detailed by Alexander (2018), 'TriHard' was originally designed to convey excitement but is currently associated with racism.

According to eSports news site Rivalry (2018), **'**PogChamp' features an exaggerated expression of a professional Street Fighter player, Ryan "Gootecks" Gutierrez. The face was made in reaction to an accident that took occurred during the filming of a video when a crew member shook the camera. 'PogChamp' can be used to acknowledge extraordinary moments and conveys extreme hype or excitement (Rivalry, 2018).

Fig 3.2 Twitch Emote "Kappa", "TriHard" and "PogChamp" – Taken from https://twitchemotes.com/

4. Modes of communication Twitch has enabled

In general, Twitch has enabled like-minded individuals to come together in real-time and foster their own communities. While the act of using images in replacement for text is no longer considered as a new form of communication, Twitch Emotes provides relatable content and inside jokes for the ever-growing and highly vocal gaming community (Magdaleno, 2014). In addition, viewers can also subscribe to their favourite streamers for a small fee to support them financially, hereby unlocking exclusive subscriber-only emotes which further establishes the individual's in-group status (Magdaleno, 2014).

6. General effects of Twitch on society

According to Forbes Magazine, top streamers can make over $100,000 annually from just streaming alone, with sponsorships and aired advertisements further contributing to their total income (Keng, 2014). As mentioned by Magdaleno (2014) in the previous section, the potential for monetary gains through subscriptions has resulted in the pursue of livestreaming as a career for some.

7. General effects of Twitch on language

Due to Twitch's prominence within the gaming community, the usage of Twitch Emotes has already embodied itself outside of the streaming platform (Magdaleno, 2014). As Crystal (2006) hypothesized, this phenomenon was largely fuelled by the constant need of internet users to seek out new terminologies that can best describe their experiences or situation.

Firstly, Twitch Emotes in the text format without pictographs have appeared on other social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram (Magdaleno, 2014). In 2020, a Twitter user complimented Tan Chuan-Jin, a Singaporean politician, for his series of entertaining tweets with 'PogChamp', resulting in another Twitter user having to explain the connotations of the Twitch Emote to the confused politician (See figure 7.1).

Secondly, outside of the written form, the usage of Twitch Emotes has already been lexicalised in spoken forms. As detailed by an anonymous member of a confession page (See figure 7.2), a dedicated platform for members within a community to share their secrets, Twitch Emotes are spoken by gamers, not just amongst themselves but also with people unaware of Twitch and gaming culture (Zheng, 2019).
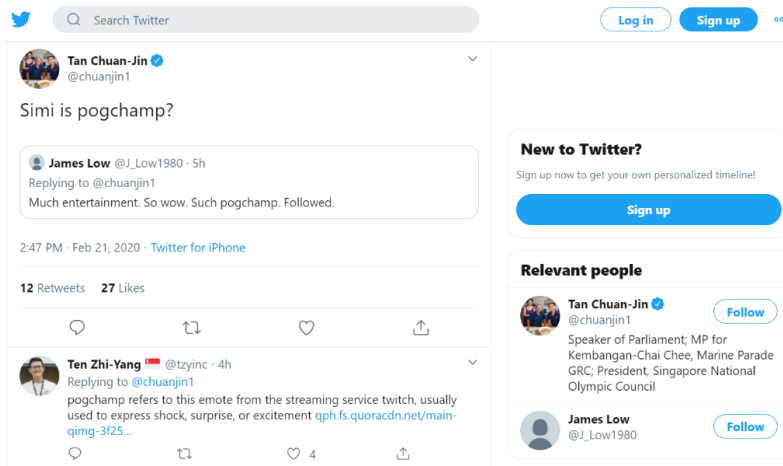

Fig 7.1 Screen capture of @chuanjin1 reacting to Twitch Emote 'PogChamp', *Simi* is Hokkien for 'What' - Taken from https://twitter.com/chuanjin1/status/1230745962378711042

Fig 7.2 Rant on confessions pages about usage of Twitch Emotes outside of Twitch - Taken from https://mothership.sg/2019/07/twitch-emotes-boyfriend/

8. Faceted Classification Scheme for Twitch

Twitch, based on Herring's (2007) faceted classification scheme, as detailed below:

Technological Features

Synchronicity	Synchronous system requiring users to be online simultaneously
Message transmission	One-way transmission through message-to-message communication
Persistence of transcript	Limited by scroll-back buffer
Size of message buffer	510 characters per message
Channels of communication	Video for broadcaster, text for audience
Anonymous messaging	Not available but money can be anonymously donated to broadcasters
Private messaging	Available as long as the sender is not 'blocked' by the addressee
Filtering	Yes, list of filtered words varies between broadcasters
Quoting	Done through copy and pasting of contents
Message format	Text, specific keywords will be converted into pictographs (Twitch Emotes)

Social Features

Participation structure	One-to-Many, communication is public but not anonymous
Participant	Mostly gamers, predominantly males aged between 18-34
Purpose	Primarily social and entertainment
Topic or Theme	Video games of the user's preferences
Tone	Casual but varies between broadcasters
Activity	Gaming, eSports and casual conversations
Norms	Appropriate usage of Twitch Emotes varies between broadcasters
Code	Predominantly English through voice (broadcasters) and text (viewers)

9. Seven Features of Spoken and Written Communication with Twitch

Based on the seven features of spoken and written as detailed by Crystal (2006), communication on Twitch can be described as:

Firstly, communication on Twitch can be categorised according to the type of users, broadcasters or viewers. Broadcasters can choose to communicate with either speech or written format, but viewers only have the option of the latter. Although the main source of communication involves text, the nature of a livestream dictates a time-bound interaction that is also dynamic.

Secondly, regarding spontaneity, interaction on Twitch is arguably spontaneous despite the presence of slight time-lag due to the interaction ultimately being subjected to the stability and strength of the stream latency between the broadcaster and the viewers.

Thirdly, Due to the unique relationship between broadcasters and viewers, viewers are involved in a 'face-to-face' interaction and can rely on the extralinguistic cues of the broadcaster to interpret meaning whereas broadcasters lack context and have to rely on the 'facial cues' of the audience through their use of Twitch Emotes.

Subsequently, communication on Twitch is like speech as it is often informal and allows for the usage of slang and obscenity.

Additionally, the interaction between users of Twitch are generally social, similar to speech.

Furthermore, interaction on Twitch does not allow for the correction or withdrawal of what is communicated. It is also arguable that chat windows can be interrupted by other users' spam, therefore, it is interruptible just like speech.

Lastly, although communication on Twitch can be graphically enhanced with Twitch Emotes and limited prosody can be manipulated through capitalisations and onomatopoeias, it is more writing-like. Broadcasters typically follow speech-like characteristics.

10. Conclusion

In summary, Twitch offers users a platform to communicate with like-minded individuals and interestingly, is a medium that displays speech-like communication even though the bulk of its users are restricted to communicate by typing in a synchronous chat window, which enables 'text-to-face' communication with the broadcasters.

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