Ng Suat Qing Chandelle
U1630335F

Twitch

Twitch is a video live streaming service that was introduced in 2011, primarily dedicated to video game live streaming. It is the most popular streaming service, with 2.2 million broadcasters and 140 million unique viewers monthly as of 2018 (Smith, n.d.).

Users in Twitch are either viewers or streamers. Viewers can choose to view the streamer's content on the site live or via video on demand (VOD). A typical livestream, on top of showing the streamer's game playing footage, involves audio commentary from the broadcaster and an embedded webcam footage of the streamer. Viewers can leave comments to interact with the broadcaster or fellow viewers on a sidebar chat using either typed messages or Twitch specific emoji. They can also give donations to streamers, which can be accompanied with picture/gif attachments and short messages. Streamers can respond to these messages as they stream, either in the chat or audibly, although the latter is usually preferred. In 2016 alone, Twitch users sent 16 billion chat messages (Smith, n.d.).

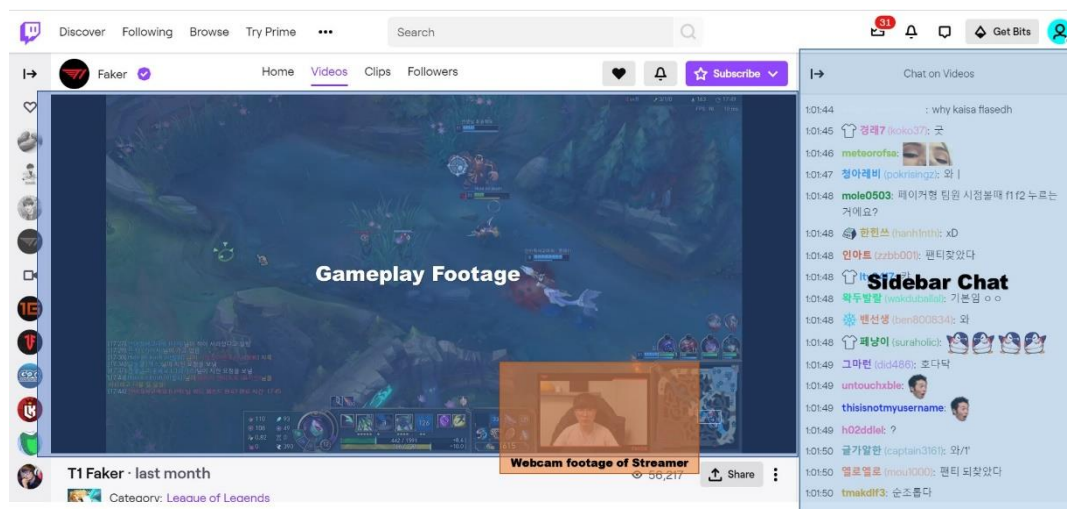Figure 1 shows a typical website layout when viewing content on Twitch.

Figure 1: Twitch website layout when viewing a stream

This paper will firstly look at the properties of Twitch as a medium of communication and their effects on language and society, and secondly evaluate if Twitch is more text-like or speech-like.

Ng Suat Qing Chandelle
U1630335F

Properties of Twitch and its effects

<u>Synchronous video and chat</u>

Twitch's synchronous video stream and chat bridges the gap between the streamer and their viewers, particularly if the streamer is a celebrity or professional who is otherwise beyond the reach of normal people.

Existing literature is particularly interested in the relationship between the streamer and their viewers on Twitch. Traditionally in such a setup where there is a performer (the streamer) and a consumer of the performer's content (the viewers), such as television and radio, there would be an unbridgeable distance between the two parties. The performer doles out one-sided interaction to a faceless big group of people, and the consumer forms a one-sided perception of the performer as an intimate conversational partner. Such a relationship is termed parasocial (Leith et al., 2019).

However, with the synchronous video stream and chat, Twitch manages to achieve a degree of closeness between performer and consumer that was never done before. It could even reach the point that some streamers are able to remember personal details of their regular viewers' lives (Suganama et al., 2018) like a friend would.

It should still be said that this system of Twitch still cannot make the interaction fully qualified as social interaction. Firstly, streamers mostly concentrate on their gameplay and commentary on said gameplay, thus meaning that their attention is not always on the chat and interacting with their viewers. Secondly, there are many viewers as opposed to just one streamer. For particularly popular channels, there could be thousands of viewers at the same time, and if they were to participate in the chat to attempt to interact with the streamer, their message would only be on screen for two to three seconds before it gets displaced by another (Recktenwald, 2017). These factors make it difficult for streamers to make actual social interactions with individual viewers. Nevertheless, as the long hours of streaming far exceeds any other engagements media figures have with the public, viewers stand higher chances to be able to interact with the streamer. Undeniably, this streamer-viewer relationship is much closer than a traditional performer-consumer relationship. Leith et al. (2019) therefore

categorizes Twitch as 'a hybrid of sorts', as the streamer's communication with their viewers alternate between parasocial and social.

Highly contextual nature

The highly contextual nature of Twitch results in the creation of in-groups and language specific to them. This aspect largely revolves around the Twitch specific emoticons. Like regular emoticons, Twitch specific emoticons are used to express various emotions, but the most commonly and widely used Twitch emoticons make use of real people's faces rather than the standard yellow smiley face.

To use the emoticons, users would have to type in the name of the emoji they wish to use, and upon sending, their message will reflect the corresponding image. Figure 2 lists some of the emoticons specific to Twitch.
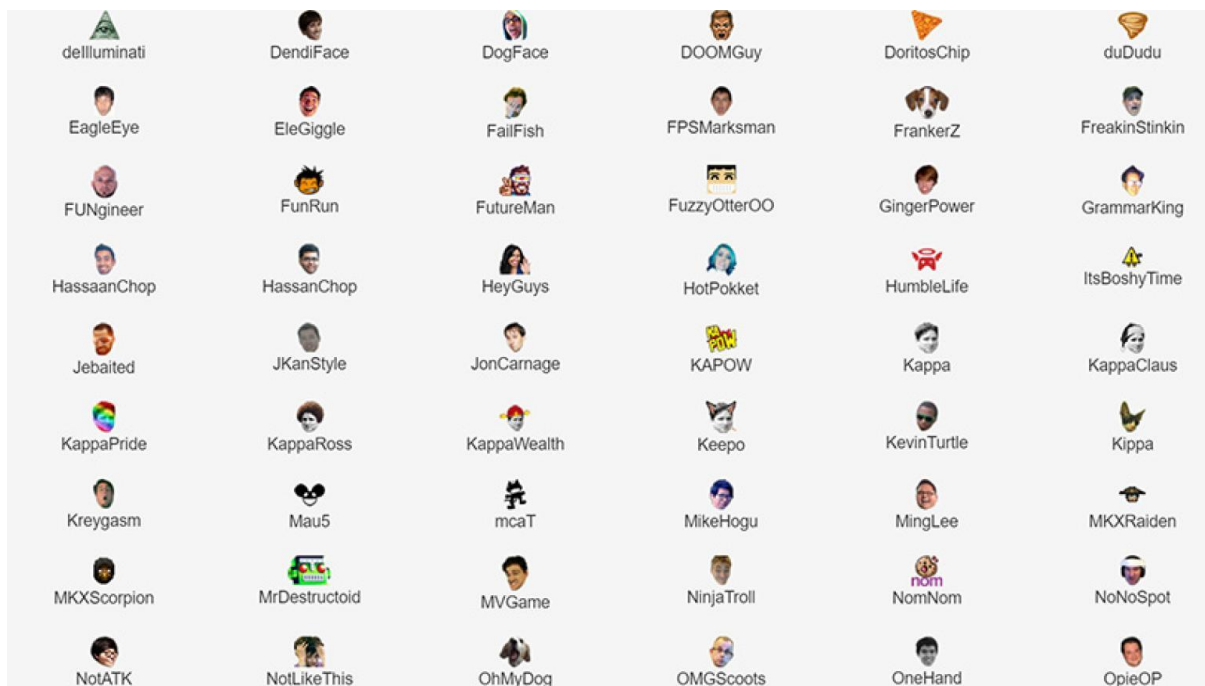

Figure 2: List of emoticons from Twitch (Murphy, 2016)

It is clear that a non-user of Twitch would be unable to comprehend what these emoticons mean and under what circumstances could they be used. To get a clearer understanding of Twitch specific emoticons, we can look at the most famous one: Kappa.

Figure 3: Kappa emoticon

The face of Kappa is a grey-scaled photograph of one of the employees of Justin.tv (which was the earlier version of Twitch) and is defined to represent sarcasm or trolling (Chartasa, 2017). Kappa has a few spin-offs, such as KappaPride (Kappa with a rainbow background) and KappaClaus (Kappa with a Santa Claus hat). KappaClaus is straightforward: it is the version of Kappa to use during the Christmas holiday period. KappaPride, on the other hand, conveys an entirely different meaning: it affirms or enquires about one's homosexuality.

Evidently, Twitch specific emoticons are not as straightforward as regular emoticons. It is unlikely for a user understand and use Twitch emoticons without knowledge of certain backstories or acquired experiential knowledge based on Twitch chat contexts. This results in an in-group for Twitch users.

To complicate matters further, Twitch allows the creation of custom emoticons for 'partners', who are essentially popular streamers with large followings. This means that specific streamers get specific emoticons, specific in meaning to them and their viewers. Thus, if a user is not a regular viewer of the streamer, they would not understand the significance of the emoticon. Furthermore, these emoticons can be made only available to users who subscribe to the streamer by paying a fee. This raises the exclusivity of the emoticons, and using them would indicate the user's sense of belonging to this community revolving around the streamer (Graham, 2019).

On top of Twitch specific emoticons, there is also the matter of game and streamer specific terms and phrases used in the chats trolling (Chartasa, 2017). For example, within League of Legends streams, it would be understood immediately that the goat emoticon or simply the word 'goat' refers to South Korean professional player Faker, as he is hailed as the 'Greatest of All Time' for this game and 'GOAT' is the acronym of this title.

Such features of the language used in Twitch makes communicating highly dependent on context, thus forming in-group communities with a sense of identity and belonging. When members of these in-groups bring these terms out of Twitch, they identify themselves as belonging to the Twitch community, and inadvertently separate themselves from everyone else.

Seven features introduced by Crystal (2006)

Firstly, Twitch can be argued to be both time bound and space bound. Streamers interact with individual viewers by selecting out their message or donation and replying it to it. Similarly, viewers can use '@' in their chat to select an addressee, either the streamer or other viewers. This is speech-like. Within the time frame of the livestream itself, due to the chat constantly refreshing, especially in streams with a large number of viewers, the messages get lost. The transiency of this messages indicate that Twitch is speech-like. However, when the livestream ends, unless deleted, the video footage and chats are saved and available as VOD. Users are able to watch playbacks and read comments sent at exact time stamps. This permanence indicates its likeness to text, and as such it is space bound.

Secondly, Twitch is usually spontaneous. This is because of its synchronous video and chat. Viewers can instantly respond to the streamer's content by leaving messages, and likewise the streamer can instantly respond to the viewers' messages once they leave it. There is no time lag between production and reception. Streamers could choose not to reply to their viewers, but in the case they do, they have very little time to be prepared and gather their thoughts. A likely time where Twitch could be contrived is when viewers give donations to streamers and write accompanying messages. In particular for large donations, viewers would likely leave long, supportive messages. These are evidently prepared for in advance.

Twitch can be considered to be both face-to-face and visually decontextualized. It is face-to-face as viewers are able to see the facial expressions and gesturing of the streamer and hear their tone as they speak. Due to the shared visual context of the gameplay, they are able to use words that make direct references, like deictic expressions and not lose understanding of each other. The live aspect of Twitch also makes it possible to provide immediate reactions to each other, making it seem like a face-to-face conversation. However, viewers are limited in their expression due to the nature of a chat box where they can only

leave typed comments. The most visual cues they can rely on to express themselves to the streamer or other viewers is by using the emoticons. As such, Twitch can too be said to be visually decontextualized.

Twitch is loosely structured. Viewers leave messages as they would if they were speaking, using informal forms, slangs (eg. *LOL*, *wtf*), contractions (eg. isn't), short forms (eg. *fk*), random capitalizations (eg. *wHAT*), excessive punctuations (eg. *my eyes!?!!??!*) and emoticons. They have little regard for proper spelling and grammar. As the chat refreshes faster, messages tend to get shorter, and sometimes to match the speed of the chat and the real-time situation of the gameplay, viewers just spam quick successions of emoticons to express themselves. Likewise, as mentioned earlier, the live aspect makes it difficult for streamers to prepare beforehand their responses, thus what they say would also be loosely structured.

Twitch is both socially interactive and factually communicative. It is factually communicative because through the stream, viewers and streamers can exchange information about the game. Streamers often provide gaming advice and tips while they engage in gameplay, and the stream of the play itself is visual demonstration of said advice/tip. On the other hand, as the streamer plays the game, viewers can leave suggestions and critiques of the streamer's gameplay through the chat. Twitch is also socially interactive. As mentioned earlier, the nature of Twitch streams almost replicate the casualness and spontaneity of a conversation between friends (Suganama et al., 2018) and create communities and bonds between people sharing the same interests.

Twitch is very much speech-like in the aspect of revision. The streamer has opportunity to rethink their thoughts before verbalizing them, but once they have spoken it cannot be taken back. It may be possible to delete that specific stream, but due to the live aspect, the effect of what is said is already experienced by viewers and cannot be reversed. Similarly, the viewer cannot take back a comment once it has been sent out, although they can repeatedly revise their message before they press enter to send it out. In this way, they are text-like. Bots and human moderators in Twitch periodically send out reminders in chats for the streamer and the viewers to be watchful of what they say, and upon the discovery of anything derogatory being said, they will ban the user who said it (Leith et al. 2019).

Twitch is both prosodically rich and graphically rich. Twitch is firstly graphically rich due to the presence of the graphics of the gameplay and the streamer. It is too, prosodically rich because viewers are able to hear the streamer as they speak and understand from their tone, pitch and volume social cues that cannot be well represented in text. The messages viewers leave could also be argued to be prosodically rich, as they do not abide by conventional writing standards and are able to convey a larger extent of their emotions and attitudes through emoticons and the use of capitalizations and punctuations. Viewers also can mimick sounds, like 'haha' for example.

Conclusion

Twitch is a unique medium of communication with a fairly well-mixed combination of text-like and speech-like features. There is much interest in the forms of interaction between streamers and viewers and how it affects relationships between them, and the type of language that arises from its community members.

References

Chatarsa, A. (2017, March 19). *The language of Twitch, an understanding of Twitch-speak.* Medium. Retrieved February 27, 2020, from https://medium.com/media-ethnography/the-language-of-twitch-an-understanding-of-twitch-speak-780476547e38

Leith, A., Ratan, R., O'Donnell, C., Ellithorpe, M., & Van Der Heide, B. (2019). *Gameplay Livestreaming: Human Agents of Gamespace and Their Parasocial Relationships* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing). Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/2323916460/

Murphy, D. (2016, June 30). *Twitch Updates Emoji Guidelines for Butts, Poop, and 'Gasms.* PCMag. Retrieved February 25, 2020, from https://www.pcmag.com/news/twitch-updates-emoji-guidelines-for-butts-poop-and-gasms

Recktenwald, D. (2017). *Toward a transcription and analysis of live streaming on Twitch.* Journal of Pragmatics, 115, 68–81. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2017.01.013

Smith, C. (n.d.). *55 Amazing Twitch Stats and Facts.* VGS. Retrieved February 28, 2020, from https://videogamesstats.com/twitch-stats-facts/

Suganuma, N., Rousso-Schindler, S., Howell, J., & Wilson, R. (2018). *An Ethnography of the Twitch.TV Streamer and Viewer Relationship* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing). Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/2125559614/