

HG2052 Language, Technology and the Internet

Assignment 1: Analysis of a medium of communication

Twitch streaming platform

Introduction

Twitch.tv is a livestreaming platform that is mainly based on video games. It started off as Justin.tv in 2007, providing live broadcasting of the founder, Justin Kan's everyday life. Twitch.tv was founded in 2011 as a spin-off of Justin.tv which allowed users to create and broadcast their own content using the platform (Iqbal, 2019). Although the main content presented on Twitch.tv is mainly gaming content, there are other popular categories which do not involve gaming:

- 1) "Just Chatting" also known as "IRL Streaming" which stands for "In Real Life Streaming". where streamers and their chat group engage in conversations about almost anything under the sun. This is done in an interesting manner whereby the streamer is using speech to address the audience - the chatgroup. In return, the streamer receives responses via text left by the chatgroup.

Similar to what Justin Kan did with Justin.tv where he did live broadcastings of his daily life, some streamers stick to live broadcasts of their daily activities as the experiences in their daily lives can be used for content to garner views without requiring a pre-planned setup. This means that these streamers do not have to start a stream with an intended purpose such as to eat or play games but more towards just having a conversation with the Twitch community. (See Figure 1)

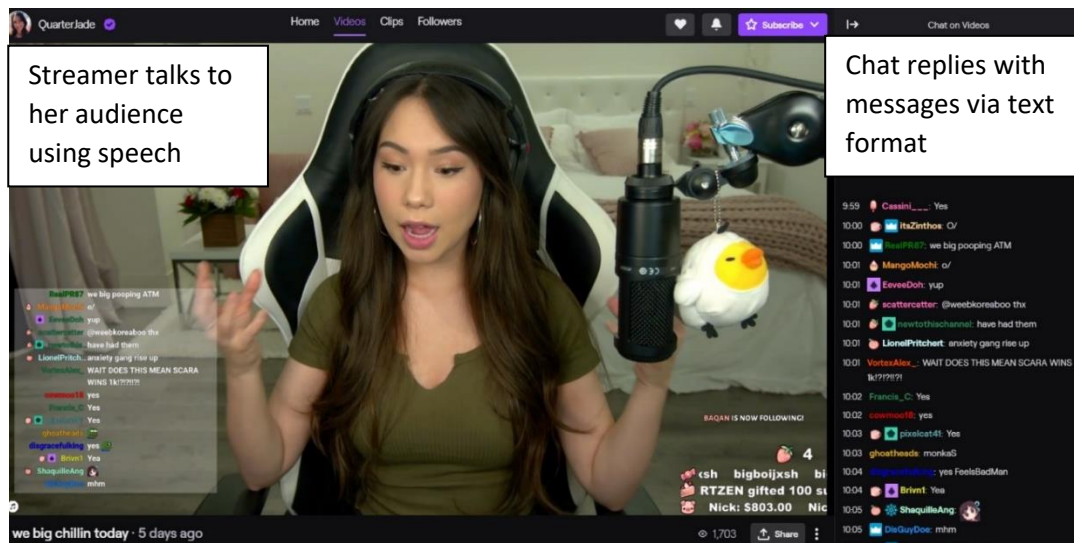


Figure 1: Streamer (QuarterJade) having a “Just Chatting” stream

- 2) “Food and Drinks” or more commonly known as Mukbangs (Literal translation “Eat broadcasts” or broadcasts of eating. This is similar to the “Just Chatting” category with the exception of the element of food included within the stream. Streamers will eat food whilst conversing with their chat. The same mode of communication applies here as well – speech from streamers and text-based responses from the chat. (See Figure 2)

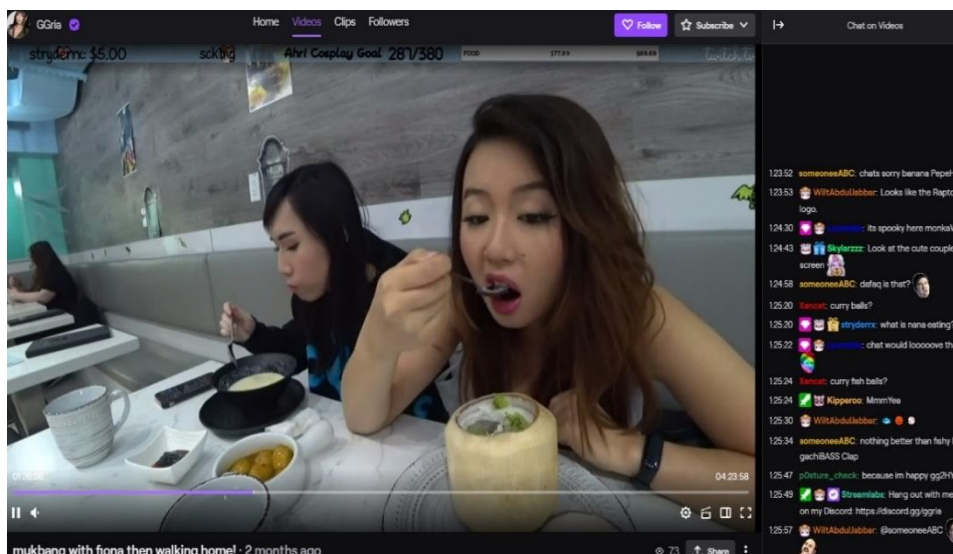


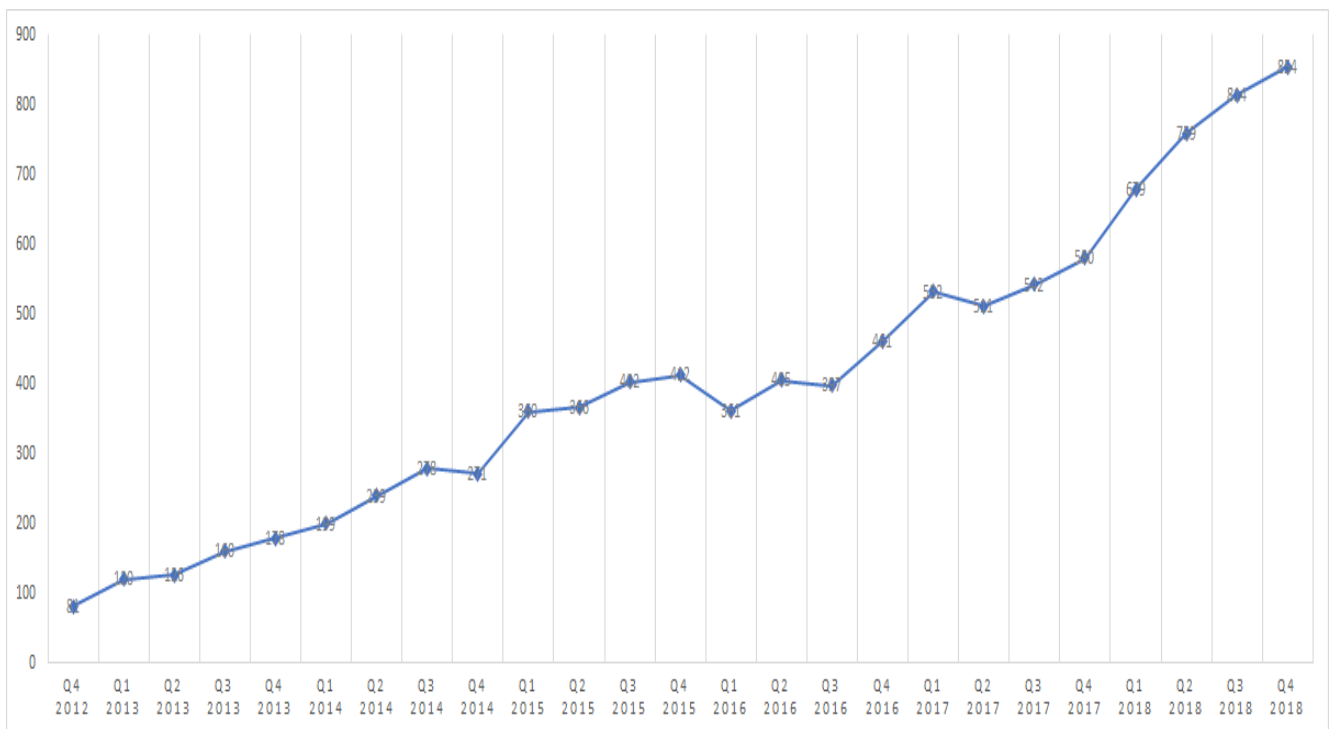
Figure 2: Streamer (GGria) hosting a “Mukbang” stream

Usage Statistics

According to BusinessOfApps.com, as of February 2018, official Twitch statistics set the number of broadcasters at 2.2 million, and the number of unique daily viewers at 15 million, with the number of monthly users pegged at 140 million. Peak concurrent viewership is set at 2 million (Iqbal, 2019). To put this into perspective, the peak concurrent viewership for Twitch is more than broadcasting channels such as CNN, Fox News and ESPN (Taylor, 2018).

According to TwitchTracker, 560 billion minutes of Twitch were watched over 2018 – rising from 255 billion minutes in 2017 – an increase of 58%. The average total number of Twitch hours viewed has been steadily on the rise. As of the last quarter of 2018, the figure stood at 854 million hours. (See Figure 3)

Figure 3: Average Twitch hours viewed by quarter, millions of hours



Data Source: TwitchTracker (Q4 2012 – Q4 2018 Statistics)

Currently, the United States accounts for the majority of views within the Twitch market. According to SimilarWeb, 23.07% of Twitch viewership comes from the US. Subsequent countries that follow only account for about 3-6% of viewership per country. (See Figure 4)

Figure 4: Twitch viewership by country: SimilarWeb



Data Source: SimilarWeb (Jan 2020 Statistics)

Linguistic Analysis

Speech like	Text like
time bound	space bound
spontaneous	contrived
face-to-face*	visually decontextualized
loosely structured	elaborately structured*
socially interactive	factually communicative*
immediately revisable	repeatedly revisable
prosodically rich	graphically rich

Figure 5: Crystal’s Seven Features in Distinguishing Communication Mediums

*Features with asterisks are not applicable to Twitch platform

With reference to Crystal’s seven features in distinguishing communication mediums (See Figure 5), Twitch is one medium where the features are not definite. Since the Twitch platform is structured in a way where the conversation involves speech from the streamer and text from the chat, both features can be said to be present within the platform. The features present seem to lean towards the middle ground of having properties from both sets of features. An example would be how the Twitch streaming platform is time bound where the conversation initiated is dependent on the duration of the stream. At the same time, it is also space bound due to the chat being text-based and confined within the chat window.

Twitch conversations are usually a mix of spontaneous responses from the streamer through speech and contrived text-based replies from the chat. Speech from the streamer is also prosodically rich because of the variations in tone and pitch whereas the texts from the chat are graphically rich in terms of symbols such as emoticons and images posted on the chat.

However, there are a few exceptions (refer to features with asterisks). The Twitch platform facilitates conversations which are more socially interactive and loosely structured. Although this is true for speech-based conversations, the chat which is text-based, also has users in the chat using emoticons and slang within their messages. Hence, there is no strict adherence to grammar rules and informal speech is mostly used during conversations.

Twitch conversations are also not completely face-to-face as the streamer does not engage in a live conversation upfront with the audience, but rather through text on the computer screen and with only the streamer's face being featured.

Literature on the Medium

There is a limited but growing body of published research done on Twitch. Robinsons (2019), identifies two categories of literature used to examine Twitch. One is the qualitative studies and research that places the focal lens on the social aspects of Twitch to be examined. The second uses a quantitative approach on the technology or system of Twitch. Since this analysis of Twitch leans towards the sociolinguistic aspect of Twitch as a medium of communication, I will be summarising relevant literature from the first category of qualitative studies and research.

Seering, Kraut and Dabbish (2017) took into consideration moderation tools in Twitch chat and their effects on user behaviour. People were found to be more likely to imitate certain messages they see in chat. There is a mention of prestige based on the status of the user which affects the level of influence a user can have within the chat. Negative behaviours like spam, when condoned and banned, were met with a decrease in similar behaviours amongst users in the chat.

Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne (2014) concluded that there is a sense of community and shared identity stemming from the participatory nature of the platform. The sense of community is established as community members develop an emotional connection and

shared history together through continuous participation within the community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

New kinds of communication

Twitch has introduced a mix of both speech and text elements to create a speech-text form of communication. This form of communication is generally established in a many-to-one manner where the chat consists of multiple users communicating with one streamer.

Although this form of communication is similar to video-conferencing platforms like Skype, the difference lies in the ability of the Twitch platform to sustain conversations with more than a hundred participants without issues. Skype, on the other hand, is limited to a capacity of 50 participants.

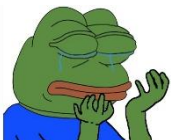
Twitch emotes can be said to be a new kind of communication as well. Although they are fundamentally emoticons which carry certain emotions, Twitch emotes contain context and some background on how the emotes came into existence. These emotes can be used without the need for texts to convey information as the emotes themselves contain contextual information which members of the Twitch community are familiar with. Some of these emotes originated from sites like Reddit and 4Chan but have seen more use in Twitch chat. Here are some examples (Alexander, 2018):



Kappa: This emote is based on former Justin.Tv employee, Josh DeSeno. He was responsible for the setting up of the chat client. This emote is used to indicate a sarcastic reply towards something happening on stream.



Lul: This emote is based on streamer and YouTuber TotalBiscuit and is used to express deep laughter.



Pepehands: This emote was adapted from Pepe the Frog and is used to express sadness over something.



Jebaited: An emote based on Alex Jebailey's expression of being surprised. This emote is when someone in chat is being tricked.

Effects on Community and Society

The way Twitch as a streaming platform allows for the formation of community and ultimately building solidarity amongst its members seems to differ from what a traditional sense of what a community would be. Traditionally, the community experience is through the gathering of a group of like-minded individuals in a geographical area where these individuals live in close proximity, often requiring physical interactions with each individual in order to form a community. In a Twitch community, individuals do not need to leave their residences. Their community experience and shared identity with other members are achieved through active participation using their time and energy to interact with others in the chat.

Robinson (2019) mentions that the communities created by streamers consisted of members who interacted regularly, eventually becoming close friends, sometimes even closer than family. This shows that the Twitch platform is somewhat able to influence individuals extensively. Such a feat is achieved without the need for traditional forms of interaction such as face-to-face interaction.

Hence, there is a possibility that in the future, interactions no longer require the physical aspect of having to speak to one another face-to-face. By establishing a community on a platform like Twitch, members can associate themselves to a group and share a common identity. This gives them the ability to forge deep bonds with one another, eventually achieving solidarity as a collective body.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) note that Twitch community members develop an emotional connection and common identity with other members through as a shared history of experiences together. With continuous participation in the chat, this shared connection is developed. As members interact more, they grow closer to one another. More positive experiences within the group lead to a deeper emotional connection to the community. Certain individuals who become regular members of the community take it upon themselves to promote positive experiences by attracting newcomers, encouraging participation in the chat to build up the community as well as welcoming and accepting new members.

Seering, Kraut and Dabbish (2017) suggest a notion of conformity within a community. They hypothesize that “users with authority or status will be more likely to be emulated”. Such a notion seems to act as a double-edged sword. On one hand, if positive experiences are

frequently promoted as mentioned by McMillan and Chavis (1986), there will be a positive outcome of deeper emotional connections and an overall welcoming and accepting community. On the other end of the spectrum, if users with authority constantly display negative attitudes, other members are likely to follow suit and display similar attitudes within the community as well. Hence, there is a risk of negative attitudes spreading throughout the community if users with higher authority do not act responsibly and promote positive behaviour.

Conclusion

To conclude, Twitch is an effective platform capable of utilising speech and text-based features to facilitate communication. The close communication amongst Twitch community groups have enabled individuals to feel a sense of belonging and identity to their own communities. However, use of Twitch as medium for communication has to be carefully moderated such that negative behaviours are discouraged and users with status hold themselves responsible for promoting a positive environment for users in the Twitch community.

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