

Parasocial Relationships in New Media

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by

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all my friends and family who supported me through my graduate journey.

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ABSTRACT

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN NEW MEDIA

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This study seeks to explore the relation of parasocial relationships and new media, such as YouTube and Twitch. To this end, this study has conducted interviews with media personae who garner millions of views per a video on these platforms. The perspective of the media personae is rarely taken into account by scholars such as Rebecca B. Rubin and, despite attention paid to the study of networked communication, new media itself has not been studied in relation to parasocial relationships. Understanding how new technology platforms and media influence and interact with our society socially is important for determining uses of these platforms and exploring how they mold our society. Through interviews with media personae and a comprehensive analysis of literature on parasocial relationships, this study finds that, because of the interactive nature of new media platforms, parasocial relationships are more likely to develop as a part of a content creator's growth. The growth of parasocial relationships because of the interactive nature of new media platforms can be shown via the use of uncertainty

reduction theory and parasocial relationship theory as applied to the interviews conducted.

INTRODUCTION

Parasocial relationships are relationships that develop between a public personality, or personae, and their viewer in which the viewer expends emotional energy, interest, and time into the public personality while the public personality is completely unaware. Viewers or listeners come to feel and consider media personalities almost as friends in parasocial relationships such as a viewer having a one-sided connection with their favourite actor or the feeling as if a viewer truly knows and is friends with a news anchor. Social media and platforms like YouTube and Twitch provide immediate access that via the inherent nature of the platform itself creates a close, personalized link to the media personae. These parasocial relationships range from news anchors to Youtube and Twitch streaming personalities who create one-sided relationships with their viewers.

Parasocial relationships can range from healthy mechanisms for augmenting social interaction to an extreme, and potentially harmful, substitute for social interaction (Horton, 220-4). Parasocial relationships are not necessarily negative and are a phenomenon of how society chooses to entertain itself. The one-sided nature of these relationships is what interests this study and how technology platforms in new media create these one-sided relationships via their limitations and procedures.

While parasocial relationships have been studied since 1956, researchers have not investigated parasocial relationships in new media with a focus on rhetoric, and the

disciplines of technical communication and digital rhetoric have not touched on the subject either. The purpose of my research is to examine the rhetoric of how parasocial relationships are created in new media such as YouTube and Twitch in order to better explain a phenomenon that has not been well researched in this area. This is important to the field of professional writing and rhetoric because discovering how audiences react and interact with new technologies and media is important for understanding how the genre of YouTube and Twitch influences audiences. Technical Communication scholars have previously been interested in similar networked communication platforms such as reddit (Pflugfelder) as well as interest in tactical technical communication (Kimball).

This study focuses on parasocial relationships in regard to new media platforms like YouTube and Twitch and how they impact the formation of parasocial interactivity. It explored the rhetoric behind the formation and execution of parasocial relationships and how the latest new media communication trends of YouTube and Twitch are creating a negative or positive effect on parasocial relationships via impacting ethos construction of media personae. This study hopes to study parasocial relationships are formed through the lens of rhetoric and technical communication in new media by incorporating idea of ethos construction, procedural rhetoric, and genre analysis.

This study will use prior research in traditional media and parasocial relationships in order to build a foundation of knowledge in which to view parasocial relationships through a rhetorical lens. Then, it will create new knowledge in the form of interviews with current YouTube and Twitch personalities. These interviews will be conducted with two YouTube or Twitch personalities who have a large audience base. The study will

further augment this data with interviews with smaller, lesser known YouTube and Twitch streamers. The goal of these interviews will be to show the rhetoric behind the creation of parasocial relationships on new media platforms.

While parasocial relationships have been researched and explained in depth as pertaining to traditional media, these relationships have not had important questions asked about them regarding new media. How are parasocial relationships formed in new media? What rhetoric is employed by new media personae that encourage or discourage parasocial relationships? How does the technology of new media help or prevent parasocial relationships? What rhetorical strategies are employed by content creators in order to cultivate or discourage parasocial relationships? These questions are important to technical communication because studying the persuasion behind parasocial interactions in networked communication platforms is related to how we communicate with rhetoric.

To answer these questions, this research explores previous theories of parasocial relationships and creates new knowledge in the form of interviews with new media personae and critical analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parasocial relationships range from news anchors to YouTube and Twitch streaming personalities. While parasocial relationships have been studied since 1956, researchers have not investigated parasocial relationships in new media with a focus on rhetoric and new technology platforms. Previous research has not examined the rhetoric of how parasocial relationships are created in new media such as YouTube and Twitch in order to better explain a phenomenon that has not been well researched. This is important to the field of professional writing and rhetoric because discovering how audiences react and interact with new technologies and media is important for understanding how the genre of YouTube and Twitch influences audiences.

Background

Literature revolving around parasocial relationships began in 1956 with Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl's article "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction." This article was the first to delve into the parasocial relationship between radio and television personae—the actors creating the content—and the audience. It lays the foundation of parasocial theory and how the advent of media has changed the relationship between the actor and the audience. It describes parasocial relationships as the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with a performer where little or no sense of obligation, effort, or responsibility is expected from the viewer (Horton, 1). Parasocial

relationships are also described as an alternative or supplement for interpersonal relationships and other types of socialization. This theory is stated by Alan and Rebecca Rubin in “Development of Parasocial Interaction Relationships” as well as supported by data collected by several researchers as noted in Rubin’s article (Rubin, 281).

A hiatus would follow until Dennis McQuail and J. R. Brown’s 1972 article “The Television Audience: A Revised Perspective” came out. This article focused on parasocial interaction instead of parasocial relationships, parasocial interaction is the one-sided interaction between the actor and audience during the media while parasocial relationships is the continuation and extension of that interaction after the media has stopped. These are the two fundamental articles on parasocial relationships. The Mcquail and Brown study delved into what audiences found appealing in media personae through quiz programs (Mcquail, 442-8). This helped to set a foundation for further studies into parasocial interaction and eventually uncertainty reduction theory.

Parasocial relationships differ from paratext and transmedia. Paratext is a concept in literary interpretation where the main text of an author is encompassed by other material provided by the author, editors, printers, and publishers (Genette, 261). These extra texts are called the paratext. The texts help the public and audience to frame the main text and may change the interpretation of the main text as well. Transmedia is a narrative or project that uses multiple forms of media in order to convey a story or information. A transmedia project combines different types of text, prints, graphics, animation, and the use of multiple platforms. Both of these terms help to inform and define parasocial relationships in a robust way but do not contribute to the research in this

study.

Further literature either focuses on the difference between parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions such as Gayle S. Stever's "Parasocial Theory: Concepts and Measures" or focuses on specific media and audiences such as Siyoung Chung and Hichang Cho's "Fostering Parasocial Relationships with Celebrities on Social Media: Implications for Celebrity Endorsement" and Bradley J. Bond's "Parasocial Relationships with Media Personae: Why They Matter and How They Differ Among Heterosexual, Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents." Parasocial relationship theory is also expanded upon in the literature with the idea of uncertainty reduction theory (URT) and relationship development theory in articles such as Elizabeth M. Perse and Rebecca B. Rubin's "Attribution in Social and Parasocial Relationships" and Rebecca B. Rubin and Michael P. McHugh's "Development of Parasocial Interaction Relationships." All of these further studies into parasocial relationships only expand on describing them as pertaining to traditional media and audience appeal through surveys of audiences in college classes. None of them delve into new media or new technology platforms that can negatively or positively affect the creation of parasocial relationships with a focus on ethos construction or procedural rhetoric, nor do any of them explore the perspective of the media personae themselves.

Knowledge Gaps

The general research focus of parasocial relationships deals with traditional media or an intersectional niche such as gender and sexuality or specific personae like celebrities. This leaves a void of research on new media such as YouTube and Twitch, the

focus of my research. This study's research therefore has been built upon the previous research of parasocial relationship and parasocial interaction theory but viewed through the lens of rhetoric in the area of YouTube and Twitch personae. The current literature also lacks interviews and data collected directly from the personae and focuses on the audience's reaction and feelings towards the personae.

This study further finds that parasocial relationships are lacking an exploration on new media platforms. This is true in regard to interactive services such as YouTube and Twitch where media personae are directly supported and can interact with audiences. Previous literature focuses on the development of parasocial relationships and traditional media without a look forward into new technologies and the ever-growing titan of social media.

New technology creates new ways for people and audiences to interact. This is especially prevalent with new media in which social interaction needs can be fulfilled with interactive media like YouTube and Twitch. Instead of passively enjoying a traditional news cast or film, audiences can now actively interact with their chosen media personae through new platforms and technology. YouTube and Twitch can be seen as the evolution of alternative interpersonal interactions and may make the creation of parasocial relationships more likely. Yet parasocial relationships in new media and new technology platforms have not been studied with an eye on the ethos construction or procedural rhetoric of the platforms themselves. This leaves a gap in knowledge that needs to be filled.

Objectives

The constant growth of new media and new technology demands that the way in which audiences interact and form relationships, parasocial relationships, with media personae be studied. It is important to understand how these new technology platforms create parasocial relationships so that society may better understand how audiences are finding alternatives to social interaction in today's social media world. To this end, this study seeks to draw upon the aforementioned literature on the development and beginnings of parasocial relationships and new knowledge created through interviews with media personae in order to understand parasocial relationships in new media.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How are parasocial relationships formed in new media?
- What rhetoric is employed by new media personae that encourage or discourage parasocial relationships?
- How does the technology of new media help or prevent parasocial relationships?
- What rhetorical strategies are employed by content creators in order to cultivate or discourage parasocial relationships?
- How do new media technology platforms impact ethos construction via their procedural rhetoric?

To answer these questions, this research explores previous theories of parasocial relationships and creates new knowledge in the form of interviews with new media personae and critical analysis.

This study demonstrates two cases where these relationships are being formed due to the audiences' knowledge and expectations of the content creators. These content creators are seen as more genuine, one-person shows that are more personally tailored towards the audience member. This ethos construction is informed by the limitations of

the platforms themselves and plays an important role in the use of parasocial relationships as a community and popularity building tool for content creators.

METHODOLOGY

There to answer the research questions identified above, I completed two interviews with prominent YouTube and Twitch streamers. Interviews were approved by the IRB at my institution (1357223-1) and were audio and video recorded for purpose of analysis. Qualitative interviews were chosen for this study in order to gain expert perspective and inside glimpses on content creators active on Twitch and YouTube. Interviews achieve a more personal collection of knowledge rather than a survey and helps the subject articulate nuanced interactions with fans and the platform itself.

To recruit participants, I contacted prominent YouTube and Twitch content creators who were active, had at least 100,000 subscribers or 500 concurrent Twitch viewers, and had been producing content for at least two years. These subjects were contact via an inquiry email for their participation in study. Once interest was affirmed, a consent form detailing the study and the participant's role. After consent was giving, a time and date for an interview was scheduled as well as interview questions sent in advance. Lastly, the interviews were conducted, recorded, transcribed, and stored appropriately. Audio or video interviews became a barrier of entry for some participants and, thus, some interviews were conducted via email.

Additionally, one other interview was conducted with a participant who had a smaller audience base (under 100,000 subscribers or less than 500 concurrent viewers on

Twitch). The addition of an interview with a different level of media personae was decided on to give a full range of data for research and analysis.

The interviews conducted for this study helped to answer the research questions by providing knowledge and perspective directly from professionals in the YouTube and Twitch industry. The methods collected knowledge about the mechanism content creators use to build audiences and create parasocial relationships by asking the content creators themselves directly about it.

Several theories are used to help analyze parasocial relationships in new media. These theories include uncertainty reduction theory, parasocial interaction theory, genre theory, ethos construction, and procedural rhetoric. Combined, these theories help inform parasocial relationships in new media to better understand and analyze the phenomena, much like technical communication scholars analyzing more formal organizations such as a corporation's official site or twitter.

Uncertainty reduction theory was first put forth by Berger and Calabrese in 1975 to advance a connection between cognition and affect (Perse & Rubin, 61). The theory states that audiences actively seek information to reduce uncertainty and that with reduced uncertainty, liking is increased. This means that as audiences increase their ability to predict or assume the performer's behavior, then relationships will develop (Perse & Rubin, 61-2). This is important for analyzing the relationships in this study because audiences see media personae on YouTube and Twitch as more genuine and have less uncertainty about them in general. This theory helps to explain and analyze parasocial relationships in new media.

Parasocial interaction theory was first described by Horton and Wohl in their 1956 article “Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction.” It states that relationships are formed between media personae and audiences that involve a one-sided interaction on the part of the spectator with a performer (Horton, 251). At its extreme, para-sociability is a complete substitute for social interaction where a person of loneliness and low self-esteem uses parasocial relationships as a substitute for autonomous social participation (Horton, 220-5). Parasocial interaction theory has also been described as “an imaginary, one-sided friendship a television viewer has with a mass communication persona or character” (Perse & Rubin, 59). Parasocial interaction theory is the basis for how parasocial relationships function. This theory allows for the explanation of parasocial relationships across mediums and for analyzing the ones that are created in new media.

Genre theory is used in this study to help identify common trends in the new media platforms of YouTube and Twitch in relation to parasocial relationships. Identifying the fixed and flexible aspects of a particular genre helps to inform and study how the genre itself limits and forces a type of media to act. In this study, the genres that will be focused upon are Twitch streams and YouTube channels.

Interview Questions

Interview questions were chosen based off of their pertinence to the way in which content creators on YouTube and Twitch create their content as well as information about their profession and experience. Interviews were semi-structured using a set of questions found in the appendix as a guideline for both me and the subject. A semi-structure

approach was chosen in order to give the interview a more open and fluid feeling so that the subject could elaborate on nuanced topics.

INTERVIEW ONE

M

Interview one was conducted via an email interview with a prominent YouTube content creator known for this study as “M”. His content focuses on artistic reviews of video games considered unique or with a cult following. His subscriber count is over 200,000 and the average view count was approximately 500,000 per a video. YouTube is a profession for this person. His channel is funded through a mixture of Patreon, fan donations, and ads run on YouTube. M was chosen based on previously explained criteria of creating content on a consistent basis, having a large following, and for being a content creator for several years.

M has been publishing content for over seven years. His channel has grown over time as M discovered an audience and video niche. M publishes videos one to two times a month. His videos evolved over time to fill a niche that the audience wanted. As M himself says in response to what do he thought was his most appealing quality for fans, “A lot of my videos are taken from suggestions sent to me by viewers, and I answer/consider all of them and keep them tracked on a large list on Google docs that's publicly available.” His video catalogue can be seen to take on a mold as M found what makes his content more appealing. This shows how direct audience feedback and

interactivity directly influence M's content thereby personalizing it for the audience creating an ethos for M that reflects audience wishes.

M has knowledge of parasocial relationships. When asked "Do you know what parasocial relationships are?" he responded, "I do. In practical terms for someone in my position, it means that someone knows far more about me than I do about them, sometimes amounting to me knowing nothing about who they are. In short, it's just a one-sided relationship." The importance of this is to show that M has notions of, and understands, parasocial relationships and their creation to some extent.

One of the reasons M feels that his content is popular is because of the genuineness of his personality and channel. "I think people understand that I'm more "genuine" in an age where a lot of people making videos have a constant stream of sponsored content." M attributes his popularity to the idea of being more relatable and authentic to the average person echoing ideas of UCT that promotes M's ethos construction. Instead of creating content that goes with trends, M focuses on keeping their videos personalized for their audience. "I'd guess people can appreciate someone who is listening to their fans for ideas rather than pretending to or ignoring them completely in favor of trending topics." M creates videos by listening and tailoring his content to direct audience feedback. "A lot of my videos are taken from suggestions sent to me by viewers, and I answer/consider all of them and keep them tracked on a large list on Google docs that's publicly available. I think people being able to approach me and have me answer them has paid off in a way I didn't expect in the long run, since I truly will "look at anything" to make a video on." M's audience, because of a sense of

authenticity and the personalized nature of YouTube, is able to approach and interact with M directly and, thus, know more about him than M could ever know about his fans. This is a stereotypical part of parasocial relationships that M is building through the ethos construction. M's authenticity comes across in many different aspects as well

One aspect of the genuine and authentic nature of M's content is that M has over 200,000 subscribers on YouTube with an average video view count of half a million, yet, M still does not like the term fan. In response to "Do you consider yourself a friend to your fans?" M said, "I still don't like to use the term "fan" often since I still see myself as a pretty average person and the idea of having fans is strange." M also manifests this authenticity with their own idea of fame. "It's really bizarre to have some people be afraid to talk to you when you don't "feel famous" or something like that." M still considers himself a "pretty average" person and not really famous despite having anything but average success on YouTube. What better way to build ethos than to appeal to audience and community as an average person? This furthers the idea of an authentic, personal content creator being appealing that leads into how the genre of a YouTube channel encourages this.

M's views on why YouTube helps cultivate fan base as opposed to traditional media is insightful and reflects the idea of being genuine or authentic building an ethos that audiences respond positively to. M responded to the question, "How do you think your platform helps cultivate a fan base as opposed to more traditional media like TV?" as such, "I think YouTube is generally more personal than television. Television typically has a lot of layers between the actors/crew and the viewers when it comes to accessibility,

and most people in Hollywood will have dedicated PR help or agents. While that's changed with the availability of Twitter, there are some celebrities who still have an agent or specialist running their account rather than using it personally. With YouTube I think people have the opposite preconceptions about it, where they're expecting the social medias of the YouTuber to be run by the person themselves and an agent running it would be the rarity. There's also the fact that anyone can start making stuff on YouTube and gain success, while gaining success in traditional mediums requires significantly more professional hurdles and tests. The content itself is usually more reflective of the audience, since some overproduced content can completely fail to relate to their audience realistically.” This reinforces M’s earlier statements about personalized content and a more authentic feel for a viewer. The interactivity shown through responding to YouTube comments on M’s videos as well as M’s weekly updates to their audience via Patreon echoes how YouTube and other new media platforms induce ethos building that appeals to the creation of parasocial relationships.

The personal atmosphere M creates even extends to viewer’s considering M as a person they can confide in and treat as a close, personal friend much like a substitute for interpersonal close friends. M further elaborated on the question of if he considers fans his friends, “I’ve had viewers reach out to me asking for help with personal problems before. Some of these people could be listening/watching to my daily, or sometimes before they go to bed every night. I understand the fact that a complete stranger could have me being a significant part of their daily routine and life while I don’t know them yet, so I always consider that when addressing their concerns. It’s definitely not a

friendship, but I understand where they're coming from.” This is an example of how a personalized, authentic media personae can cultivate extreme parasocial relationships as described by Horton & Wohl (Horton, 221).

While M experiences these extreme parasocial aspects from their fans, he still responds to the question of whether he believes parasocial relationships can be a substitute or replacement for interpersonal relationships as such, “I don't think it's a replacement. It might help supplement feelings of isolation people have, but ultimately human beings are social creatures. Friendships are usually formed by people who have a lot of similarities, whether its from their background, interests, or situations. I can't have the same story about a specific professor that a fan has, or know about the same local restaurant. Having friendships and romantic relationships allow for a lot more meaningful and personal interactions than I can offer.” M acknowledges the limits of their platform in regard to relationships, but still has these extreme types of parasocial relationships happen. Audience members and fans are complete strangers to M yet act as though M is a close friend and go to them for advice and problems. Why does this occur when M does not necessarily believe that he is a substitute for interpersonal relationships? The reason is, M creates this atmosphere rhetorically through his use of the procedural ethos of the new media platforms they use. Direct feedback via comments, email, Discord channels, direct funding through Patreon, and his own presentation as an average person feeds into an ethos construction that appeals to creating parasocial relationships through the interactive mechanism intrinsic to new media platforms.

M's own insight on the value or condition of parasocial relationships reflects the non-extreme parasocial relationship that Horton and Wohl describe as well as showing extreme parasocial relationships earlier. "Hypothetically, if someone was living in an isolated cabin in the middle of Alaska I'm sure that watching YouTube videos of people they like would be infinitely better than having nothing, but I'm positive that it wouldn't be a satisfaction that would last. Parasocial relationships can enhance a person's social engagement happiness, but I don't think it's strong enough at a base level to simply replace real interpersonal relationships." Parasocial relationships are viewed by M as an augment to a person's social interaction, not a replacement. This seems at odds with some of M's interactions with fans that seek solace from a complete stranger they watch videos of and how M constructs a personae that encourages fans to be personal and interactive with them.

YouTube content creators, like M, are often average people who have developed large followings. These individuals are thrust into being famous media personae for hundreds of thousands of fans. M typifies this in response to the question, "How do you think your platform helps cultivate a fan base as opposed to more traditional media like TV?"

"There's also the fact that anyone can start making stuff on YouTube and gain success, while gaining success in traditional mediums requires significantly more professional hurdles and tests." These average people face situations that they never expect and deal with fame as an individual rather than how actors or musicians will have an apparatus of support for their fame. "As I've gotten more prominent, I notice more

people contacting me, but also some of the reactions can be more extreme when it comes to being intimidated by me or addressing me really formally. It's hard to get used to.” It is difficult for the average person to deal with this on their own, but it adds to the ethos construction of the average, relatable, personal content creator who is just another friend of yours streaming or making YouTube videos. M is just one example of another relatable, average person for audiences to view and create one-sided parasocial relationships with because of how new media platforms encourage and, to an extent, force interactivity and personal contact with audiences via comments, daily to weekly updates, emails, Discord channels, and direct audience funding.

INTERVIEW TWO

Destiny

Interview two was conducted via a Discord interview with a large Twitch streamer, who also has a sizable YouTube channel, named Destiny. Destiny's content focuses on game streaming, political debates and engagement, and audience interaction. His subscriber count on YouTube is over 150,000 and his Twitch stream averages 5,000 concurrent viewers with over 2,200 subscribers. Twitch and YouTube are Destiny's profession. Destiny was chosen for the criteria described earlier in the study, he is one of the original Twitch streamers who grew as the platform did, he consistently puts out content on a daily basis, he has a large following across several platforms, and is known for having nuanced, well-thought opinions on a wide range of topics from politics to philosophy.

Destiny streams nearly every day whether it be gaming, political talks, drama, or IRL (in real life) streaming. Clips and videos made from his streaming are then also uploaded to YouTube on a regular basis. Destiny also maintains a sizeable Reddit and Discord channel where his audience posts multiple times a day. His audience has grown with his popularity, but he has been a content creator on Twitch from nearly the beginning of the platform's life. When asked about how he has changed as he has grown in popularity, it becomes obvious how long he has been in the profession. "It's hard to

say if there was a change, because when I was a smaller content creator uhm I was like uhm I was still one of the largest. Because I, streaming kind of grew with me. It's not like I started with other big content creators, I just like uhm yea I started and streaming grew so it kind of happened alongside each other, so like public attention, hate threads, fans and anti-fans, people trying to harass me is stuff I've dealt with from the beginning.”

Destiny's description of the growing platform accents how important and intrinsic interactivity and ethos is to these platforms. From the beginning there were hate threads, fans and anti-fans, and a focus on the content creator and who they are.

Destiny has knowledge of parasocial relationships and seemingly tries to steer away from the more potentially harmful aspects of creating extreme parasocialable relationships. In response to if fans consider Destiny a friend, Destiny said, “I mean, I would hope not necessarily. I mean like, it really depends what we mean by the word friend. If people email me about really really personal stuff like someone emails hey I'm trying to figure out where to go to college or whatever I usually will be like hey I can't really make this decision for you you need to talk to the appropriate some kind of councilor or something, uhm or uhm a therapist or something. I usually try to draw pretty clear lines there because I can't give that advice without really knowing someone.”

Destiny does not consider fans friends. He tries to not fulfill the capacity that a close friend may fill for an audience member, yet his audience asks for advice on personal matters and has created a community based around Destiny's ethos. Much like M, Destiny has had to negotiate what level of involvement with fans he has as he as grown.

While Destiny tries to not engage in extreme parasocial relationships, he does interact with his audience on a very personal and interactive level. When asked about his own authenticity and what it brings to his appeal, Destiny said, “Yea, I don’t think that is required to be a good streamer, but I think being genuine has been a really important thing for my brand.” The Twitch chat during his streaming also lends itself to a more interactive experience for his audience as Destiny said about the platform’s interactivity. “Well, for twitch it’s the fact that it’s live and I have a chat room. For YouTube you could arguably say the comments section but that’s not really good, the connections on YouTube are much less personal than the connections on a live-streaming platform.” These interactive sections of YouTube and Twitch, as well as Discord and Patreon, shows how the platforms themselves incentivize personal appeal and the construction of an ethos that preys upon parasocial relationships as a means to grow a community or, as Destiny says, brand.

Some of the more appealing qualities for Destiny that his audience likes involves incorporating the approachable, funny, person demeanor that Destiny cultivates as a part of his ethos. When asked about how Destiny makes his content more appealing, he responded, “Okay, ways in way I make my stream more approachable, so I mean I play certain video games that other people play so that there is relevant interest in what I’m doing. Uhm I ugh incorporate a lot of humor in my stream I mean being funny is an important part. I reveal a lot of personal information to kind of like build a stronger connection with people. When people feel like they know more about you personal it gives them more things to relate to and makes them feel like they have a closer

relationship with you. And then I try to interact heavily with my community so that it feels like they have a more personal relationship with me, yea.” Destiny specifically interacts heavily with his community to create the more personal relationships with his audience to help grow and sustain his fan base. He reveals personal facts and stories about himself to help his audience better understand him and to make his stream more personal as he explicitly states in building a stronger connection via revealing personal information. Destiny’s own ethos construction instigates mechanism for creating parasocial relationships like uncertainty reduction theory and parasocial interaction theory order to build his audience base on new media platforms that are made to create communities around a media personae.

One of the ways in which Destiny appeals to his audience is through having similar political ideologies that reduce audiences’ uncertainty about him and his similarity to the audience themselves. When asked about what makes his content appealing, he responded, “I mean like, a lot of people agree with me politically, I think my thought process is really important to a lot of people, so the fact that I am able to tackle certain political things in a relatively cold way I think is appealing to a lot of people because left leaning people typically don’t do that.” His audience responds well to his personalized stream and shows that Destiny’s own rhetoric with construction ethos is to garner audience appeal through methods that are shown to encourage parasocial relationships such as uncertainty reduction theory.

Destiny, much the same way as M, responds heavily to their audience in a direct way. When asked if his growth in popularity changes interactions he has with fans,

Destiny responded. “No actually, I try to keep the same interactions all the time. I don’t know how it still works, I guess still like up until a couple months ago I responded to every single email I got and then uhm like I still pay attention to chat, I talk to people in chat, I know a lot of people from chat and everything.” Destiny again shows that his use of a more personalized and authentic stream helps cultivate and grow his audience through making a personae that deals directly on an individual level with his audience.

While Destiny has shown that he interacts heavily with his audience as a part of success, he does not necessarily agree that direct audience feedback is better than more traditional ways of feedback for media like focus groups. Destiny’s response to the difference between feedback in new media and traditional media is enlightening. “Uhm, not necessarily. I mean you get more direct feedback, but a focus group feedback might be more accurate because you’re collecting data and you’re hopefully parsing it in a more responsible manner, whereas online you are reading stuff so you’re going to have a bunch of internal biases in terms of like how you interpret the feedback.” Interaction is a key part of new media as opposed to traditional media in Destiny’s mind. “Well, I mean interaction is the number one mark of new media today that doesn’t really exist on TV. Like ugh, if there is a GoT actor you like I mean you can’t really do anything on HBO with him right, but if you get on social media or especially things like twitch then you can very heavily interact with people.” Destiny is constructing an ethos that allows for his audience to directly and individually interact with him on a personal basis. For all intents and purposes, Destiny is being a friend to his audience members who are the base of his profession and income. While not consciously constructing parasocial relationships,

Destiny is obviously following through with rhetoric and methods that will cause parasocial relationships in the way he builds his ethos.

Destiny's construction of his ethos extends to making himself as a person who has not changed despite his popularity. He not only opens up personally to his audience, but he also is open with his opinion of himself. In response to the question of if he feels like an average person Destiny said, "I feel more or less the same as I've always felt. Introspection is very important to me I think I have a very accurate assessment of myself like I don't god complex or anything I think I understand my weaknesses and my strengths pretty well." Destiny's life can be seen as an open book for his audience. From his humour, political opinions, and personal stories to his public introspection on his own popularity and ego, Destiny truly seems to interact and become personal with his audience. This personal atmosphere that Destiny creates opens the way for creating parasocial relationships with his audience by reducing uncertainty, increasing appeal, and taking on aspects of interpersonal relationships for his audience.

MULTI-LEVEL INTERVIEW

A smaller semi-professional content creator was also interviewed as a part of a multi-level approach to creating knowledge about parasocial relationships in new media. This content creator was picked based on his smaller size. The interview was conducted over email. The type of content creators that were interviewed were mainly from Twitch as it allows better for smaller non-professional content creation.

The interview echoed Destiny and M's interviews in a smaller scale. The subject responded to the interactivity of Twitch as a platform much the same way the others did. "It helps build audiences due to the fact that it's nearly instantaneous. You could have a few viewers and share one niche interest with them and that alone can be consequential and result in them telling friends, etc. It functions similarly to how you can "tag" someone in a post on virtually any social media now. It's allowed me to be conscious of it too – but more importantly, it kind of shows the importance of decision making when streaming in the way of what I play, maybe how I talk about a subject or don't talk about a subject."

Smaller media personae streaming also told of how they developed more personal relationships within their community due to its smaller size. Often, with a smaller audience, every donation is a big event and causes a closer interaction than larger

streamers have with their donations and audience. The smaller content creator's streams are characterized by a more interactive and personal experience in order to grow their audience. This is partly because with a smaller audience, they have less people taking up their interaction time and attention. This echoes the same type of construction ethos shown in the larger content creators but at a smaller scale. As the subject stated in response to their most appealing quality, "Depends on the medium. I'd say overall, transparency and a sense of self-awareness and perhaps somewhat outlandish commentary." As well as with their response to how they interact with fans, "With music I try to be – but it can be..arduous. With streaming – I definitely go out of my way to try and be especially since it's something I'd like to build up further." Already it can be seen that a smaller content creator is trying to build the same type of ethos that interacts with an audience on a personal basis and thus building the first inklings of a community predicated upon parasocial relationships.

The interview with a smaller content creator helps to show how the ethos construction that content creators engage in is ever present from the beginning. The new media platforms themselves incentivize the personalization and creation of communities and streams where parasocial relationships are fostered. It then becomes a universal foundation for becoming a content creator on a new media platform because small content creators and larger ones are use the same rhetoric to build their popularity. It shown through the interview with the smaller content creator and Destiny's own story of being a content creator from the beginning of Twitch.

ANALYSIS

New media platforms tend towards more interactivity, more personalization, and more direct response to an audience. As shown by the interviews with M and Destiny, as well as smaller content creators, this allows for the audience to become more familiar and have a stronger bond with the content creator via the ethos construction that each media personae engages in. I argue that the way in which the ethos is constructed is greatly informed by the procedural rhetoric of the platforms themselves with YouTube and Twitch forcing interactivity and the building of a personalized community by how one makes a profession of being a content creator. The bond of intimacy that is created is described in parasocial relationships as relationship between the persona and any member of his audience is inevitably one-sided, and reciprocity between the two can only be suggested. (Horton, 214) This intimacy is a result of the Discord channels, comment sections, email responses, live chats, and sub-Reddits that are built around these media personae and their construction of the average, personal friend streamer that appeals to audiences.

Theories

In what ways do media personae use new media to better persuade audiences to watch their content? The fundamental appeal of YouTube and Twitch appears to be the construction of an authenticity, personalized ethos created via the mechanisms inherent to

Twitch and YouTube. Audience members are not watching and supporting a media apparatus as they would when they watch a movie, instead they are supporting a one-man-show of a seemingly average individual. The content creator's rhetoric centers around creating their ethos as another friend of the viewer while being authentic and personal towards them. These rhetorical strategies tie back into parasocial relationships via the mechanism that propagate parasocial relationships between media personae and audiences such as UCT.

Rhetorically, these media personae are using the interactivity of new media platforms in order to better engage and persuade audiences to support their content. The way in which YouTube and Twitch procedural force interaction with the audience and creates a more personal experience for the fans grows the brand of the content creator, increasing their popularity. The interaction is intrinsic to these platforms because of the direct feedback from comment sections and a live chat as well as the third-party sites built around the profession of a content creator such as Discord channels, responsive email, and Patreon. These third-party sites incentivize creating a community that views the content creator as a personal friend and thus enables parasocial relationships. What ends up happening is that many content creators are forced into parasocial relationships where audience members will confide and ask advice on very personal matters which leads to content creators negotiating boundaries themselves as their popularity grows. The negotiation of intimacy with audience members are shown by Destiny's own struggle with personal advice and recommending his audience seek professional help rather than his.

Uncertainty reduction theory can be seen strongly in new media personae. As M's interview shows, YouTube content creators create an authentic and personal persona that fans interact with more directly. The fans thus reduce their uncertainty about the media personae and increase their liking of them as well as increase their likely-hood of developing a relationship. As Rubin's article states, "Mediated relationships, however, are characterized by passive uncertainty reduction strategies, such as watching personalities on television, and active strategies, such as talking about the personalities with others. These noninteractive strategies have been linked to the development of parasocial interaction." (Perse & Rubin, 61) The noninteractive strategies can be seen in audiences viewing the YouTube media personae and discussing them with others audience members in the comments section, forums, Discord channels, and Patreon. "In the mediated context, research has observed that duration of program viewing is related to knowledge about programs." (Perse & Rubin, 63) This indicates that as audience members of YouTube and Twitch channels view more content, they then gain more knowledge of the content and media personae and thus find the media personae more appealing and end up participating in parasocial interactions as well as creating parasocial relationships because of the content creator's channel apparatus that demands the building of a community. With an understanding of UCT, this shows that through the reduction of uncertainty, the viewers are developing a liking and relationship with the media personae.

The relationships with fans that new media personae have falls right in line with parasocial relationship theory as described by Horton and Wohl. "The more the

performer seems to adjust his performance to the supposed response of the audience, the more the audience tends to make the response anticipated. This simulacrum of conversational give and take may be called para-social interaction.” (Horton, 215) What better represents this than M’s take on why YouTube and M’s career as a content creator is successful? “I think YouTube is generally more personal than television. Television typically has a lot of layers between the actors/crew and the viewers when it comes to accessibility, and most people in Hollywood will have dedicated PR help or agents. While that’s changed with the availability of Twitter, there are some celebrities who still have an agent or specialist running their account rather than using it personally. With YouTube I think people have the opposite preconceptions about it, where they’re expecting the social medias of the YouTuber to be run by the person themselves and an agent running it would be the rarity. The content itself is usually more reflective of the audience, since some overproduced content can completely fail to relate to their audience realistically.” Not only do content creators like M and Destiny tailor their content to appeal to fans, but they also do it while constructing an ethos of the personal, regular friend in which the audience member can essentially “hang out” with in Discord channels, in the Twitch live chat, in the forums, on Reddit, or simply by emailing the content creator. Their rhetoric centers around creating this identity for their audience to create a community around their channel in order to grow the fan base and profit from them.

YouTube and Twitch as media platforms have their own unique qualities that truly incentivize the behavior of creating these personalized connections to a community.

A YouTube video or Twitch stream is a much different type of media content than more traditional media and has its own rules and etiquette. The differences range from the medium itself to the ways in which audiences can interact and give direct feedback on the media.

A YouTube channel is the forward-facing presentation of a YouTube content creator. Every content creator on YouTube has a channel that acts as the store-front for their catalogue. The channel contains the videos that the content creator has made. The videos on the channel all share a similar format of thumbnail, time length, title, views, and upload time. These are the constraints when which a content creator on YouTube works in to advertise and have their video catch the audience's eye. Channels and videos on YouTube are also characterized by subscriptions. Subscriptions are audience members who have subscribed to content in order to have the videos of that content creator in their feed. This is the primary way YouTube content creators build, maintain, and gauge the size of their audiences. The way in which YouTube limits content creators to the confines of the YouTube channel genre encourage direct audience feedback and creating third-party networked communities to grow and profit. A YouTube channel may not be profitable in itself, but viewers can fund it via a Patreon that gives money directly to the content creator while providing privileged, pay-walled content and updates to the paying audience members; A Discord channel can provide real-time live chat with the media personae at any time as well as voice chat and a place to connect with fellow fans. All of this is incentivized by the way in which YouTube allows its content creators to make profits via growing a community. Videos themselves house a comments section, that can

be disabled, which provides immediate, direct feedback on videos for content creators as well as live-streams that do have live chat as well.

Twitch functions much like YouTube, the content creator has a channel that can contain a video catalogue but is primarily a means to view a live-stream. The Twitch channel achieves two goals with its format. One, it houses the live video of the streamer for audiences to watch, and, two, it provides background information and links to other websites like Patreon, Twitter, and YouTube where audiences can find more ways to view the content creator. One of the hallmarks of a Twitch stream is the Twitch chat and the ability for audience members to directly donate money to the streamer. Whereas YouTube has a comments section for direct feedback, Twitch has a real-time chat that feeds information and reactions to the streamer. Again, Twitch incentivizes the creation of an ethos that builds a personal community around the content creator in order to build a profession as being a media personae.

Interviews

Both interviews of M and Destiny bring to the forefront the experience of popular content creators in new media. They share similarities but also have differences based on their primary platform of either YouTube or Twitch. While they may vary slightly, both content creators point towards the more robustly interactive and personalized platforms of new media as important for forming relationships that grow an audience.

There was a heavy emphasis from both interviews on the way in which Twitch and YouTube help to be more interactive with audiences. One prominent way that this manifests is in the direct communication with the audience. Both content creators

respond directly to emails, interact directly with a chat or Discord, and have almost a tailored experience for their audience. As Destiny says, “I guess still like up until a couple months ago I responded to every single email I got and then uhm like I still pay attention to chat, I talk to people in chat, I know a lot of people from chat and everything.” As well as M, “A lot of my videos are taken from suggestions sent to me by viewers, and I answer/consider all of them and keep them tracked on a large list on Google docs that’s publicly available. I think people being able to approach me and have me answer them has paid off in a way I didn’t expect in the long run, since I truly will “look at anything” to make a video on. I’d guess people can appreciate someone who is listening to their fans for ideas rather than pretending to or ignoring them completely in favor of trending topics.” While differing slightly, both showcase how each content creator is using the personal ethos they constructed in order to build a community via direct and individual interaction, thus creating parasocial relationships with their audience without even necessarily consciously doing so.

Both content creators also show how they reduce uncertainty about themselves which improves audience retention and growth through creation of parasocial relationships. This confidence in the attributes and personality of the content creators creating stronger influences on building audience appeal, and parasocial interaction, echoes Perse & Rubin’s own study. “The second hypothesis was also supported. Attributional confidence was a direct influence on parasocial interaction.” (Perse & Rubin, 71) “Uncertainty reduction theory pointed out that reduced uncertainty about characters partially explains the development of parasocial relationships.” (Perse &

Rubin, 73) In interviews, Destiny showed an almost reckless abandon with how open he is with his fan base about himself and his personal life showing his construction of an ethos that exudes the illusion of a close, personal friend. Everything from childhood stories to IRL streaming of his time in the city are a part of his brand, read as his ethos. This leads fans to know and be personal with Destiny across his stream, Discord, Reddit, and YouTube. M shows a similar emphasis on being personal with fans. While M is more private with their personal life, fans are still communicating with them on a personal basis through emails and direct influence on video content as well as Patreon and Discord.

Destiny and M as content creators have both demonstrated in their interviews that they are the embodiment of parasocial relationships, and that new media positively influences the creation of parasocial relationships through the need to construct an ethos closer to a personal friend than an entertainer in order to make being a content creator into a profession. As Horton and Wohl state, “The more the performer seems to adjust his performance to the supposed response of the audience, the more the audience tends to make the response anticipated. This simulacrum of conversational give and take may be called para-social interaction.” (Horton, 215) Both Destiny and M echo their audiences’ wishes as they create content that appeals to them. M does this more directly with their use of direct audience feedback to create the list of games they will use in their content. Destiny shows this by his personal interaction with fans and their feedback to create more appealing content. The way in which both content creators interact with their audiences reflects Horton and Wohl’s own example of extreme parasocial relationships, “The

central fact in this explanation seems to be the one which touches on Miss Berg's ability to suggest to her audience that she is privy to, and might share, their inmost thoughts." (Horton, 217) Destiny and M seem, to their audience, to have knowledge of their own audiences' desires and thoughts through their personalized interaction with the audience. This can be seen with how audience members will email and contact Destiny and M for advice on personal matters as if they knew everything about the audience member and the best decision for them and feeding into the extreme parts of parasocial relationships that end with Destiny and M being substitutes for interpersonal relationships that would normally give advice.

The direct contact with the content creators via email or the direct interaction through chat or comment sections typifies a parasocial motive as Horton and Wohl describes. "Both of these interpretations may be true; we would emphasize, however, a third motive – the confirmation and enrichment of the para-social relation with them. It may be precisely because this is basically an illusion that such an effort is required to confirm it. It seems likely that those to whom para-social relationships are important must constantly strive to overcome the inherent limitations of these relationships, either by elaborating the image of the other, or by attempting to transcend the illusion by making some kind of actual contact with him." (Horton, 220) This idea plays out exceedingly similarly in M's description of audience members coming forward to them asking for advice or in the simple fact that more people have started to contact them with their growing popularity. As M states themselves, "As I've gotten more prominent, I notice more people contacting me." The rise of M's popularity coinciding with increased

personal communication and interaction with fans shows just how growing parasocial relationships is a part of growing as a content creator.

All of these concepts from the interviews are influenced by the media platforms of Twitch streams or YouTube videos. The way in which these content creators make their content, with all its personalized and interactive aspects, is because of how Twitch and YouTube as a genre place limitations and rules on the content via the way in which a profession develops around these platforms and the way in which these platforms necessitate the creation of a community apparatus of networked communication in the form of Discord channels, Reddits, emails, and Patreons.

CONCLUSION

Exploring how new media can affect networked communications and the users of technology is important. New media platforms like YouTube and Twitch create a place in which media personae can directly interact with their audiences in a way that traditional media could never allow. This interaction creates a more personalized experience that exhibits many of the properties of parasocial relationships and thus forces a profession where constructing an ethos around the development of communities and parasocial relationships is seemingly necessary. These properties also help to cultivate, sustain, and grow an audience for these new media content creators; effectively creating a platform where growing parasocial relationships are easy and beneficial, and perhaps necessary, to the sustained growth and popularity of a YouTube or Twitch professional.

The way in which these new media content creators are able to more directly interact and get direct feedback from audiences is creating a platform where creating parasocial relationships is a helpful way of maintaining oneself as a content creator on YouTube or Twitch. Interviews from content creators confirm the ways in which the interactivity of YouTube and Twitch are helping to cultivate audiences and parasocial relationships. From UCT showing the more personalized interactions to appeal to audiences and influence parasocial relationships to the way in which content creators mold their ethos and content to appeal to audiences like in parasocial interaction theory, it

can be shown that there is a strong incentive in these platforms that creates and profits off of parasocial relationships.

With the ever-growing popularity of new media platforms such as YouTube and Twitch for the entertainment of society, it is necessary to study and explore how these platforms affect and maintain their audience. It is also important to find out how the content creators themselves are affected and maintain these professions as one-person entertainment organizations that interact constantly with the audience in a direct way. As such, this study hopes that further exploration of the mechanisms surrounding content creators in New Media will be further studied.

APPENDIX

Interview Questions

In what ways have you tried to promote or make your content appealing to people?

What was the biggest change from being a small content creator to a large one?

Have you noticed interactions with your fans change over time as your popularity grows?

What do you think is your most appealing quality for fans?

Do you know what parasocial relationships are?

Are you interactive with your fans, or do you just create content?

How do you think your platform helps cultivate a fan base as opposed to more traditional media like TV?

Do you consider yourself a friend to your fans?

Do you think your fans consider you a friend?

In what ways does YouTube or Twitch help you connect with your audience?

Do you think you would be as popular/successful on a more traditional media like TV or radio?

What have your interactions been like with fans when you have met them in person?

What do you think is your most popular type of content you create?

How much time a week do you generally spend being a content creator?

Do you think that your content can be used as an alternative to interpersonal socialization?

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BIOGRAPHY

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