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Trying to Save the Game(r): Understanding the meaning-making process of YouTube subscribers surrounding mental health and video game vlogging

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Running Head: TYRING TO SAVE THE GAME(R)

Trying to Save the Game(r): Understanding the meaning-making process of YouTube
subscribers surrounding mental health and video game vlogging

University Honors Program Thesis/Capstone/Creative Project

University of Nebraska at Omaha

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Abstract

Through technological innovation and the rise of digital media platforms, many young adults are afforded the opportunity to spend their lives on the Internet. Not only is a large amount of time spent on the Internet by most people, but young adults are making media sharing-platforms, specifically YouTube, part of their daily lives (Westenberg, 2016, p. 8). YouTube allows content creators to produce videos that not only attract audiences of different ages and geographic location, but, too, create an intimate bond between creator and subscriber, allowing each party to communicate and engage in content related activities through the comments section (Westenberg, 2016, p. 9). This qualitative study examined the comments and experiences of subscribers of a gaming YouTuber with over one million subscribers: GameGrumps. Specifically, this study analyzed the meaning making processes of YouTube subscribers surrounding their relationship with GameGrumps who discloses his personal mental health challenges in YouTube gaming videos. Via in-depth interviews with four GameGrumps subscribers, this study sheds light on how subscribers disclose their own personal mental health experiences on a gaming YouTuber's comments section in order to uncover subscriber intentions and outcomes for self-disclosure and how this may implicate the online relationship between gaming YouTuber and subscriber. Results show disclosing creates positive self-awareness, solidarity in experiences, and a stronger understanding and bond with a YouTube gamer.

Keywords: self-disclosure, mental health, YouTube, game vlogging, GameGrumps

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Trying to Save the Game(r): Understanding the meaning-making process of YouTube subscribers surrounding mental health and video game vlogging

The video sharing platform YouTube is one of the most popular mainstream media platforms (Burgess, Green, Jenkins, & Hartley, 2009, p. vii). Video-sharing has allowed content creators to showcase diverse and evolving content to worldwide audiences since 2005 (Burgess, Green, Jenkins, & Hartley, 2009, p. 1). Beyond beauty blogs, lookbooks, or vine compilations, YouTube is home to many YouTube gamers who, over several years, create large followings. The specific term for the practice is game-vlogging, or being a video game vlogger (Pietruszka, 2016, p. 54). These gamers, by playing various video games while recording their reactions on a camera for their viewers, oftentimes use humor to add "color" to their content (Westenberg, 2016, p. 17).

YouTube gamers can serve as social support for newer and older subscribers. Subscribers can leave comments, start a discussion, like, share, and subscribe to the YouTuber's channel to get notifications about updates (Pietruszka, 2016, p. 56). This support can be seen in charity involvement, playing a mental or physical health-themed video game, or not playing a game at all but using their channel in a therapeutic matter with long recorded discussions about depression, suicide, and/or health illness such as cancer (GameGrumps, 2012; Daz Games, 2013; Markiplier, 2012; iHasCupquake, 2010). These gaming YouTubers allow their subscribers into their personal lives and share troubles they have faced (Westenberg, 2016, p. 9). This creates a friendship bond between the two parties that makes the YouTuber appear more admirable and relatable, for example, than a Hollywood celebrity (Westenberg, 2016, p. 8).

Literature Review

Let's Plays: YouTube and the gaming community

Nguyen (2016) observed the concept of Let's Plays videos which allow the gamer to play a game and record their reactions, while the viewer can watch after it has been uploaded to YouTube. Let's Plays can be defined as video recordings of one's self that include commentary (Nguyen, 2016, p. 1). Though the amount of commentary and choice of an intro and outro ultimately depend on the gaming YouTuber, their implementations help brand the gaming YouTuber with a trademark or certain phrase (Pietruszka, 2016, p. 56).

Let's Plays are also classified as a performance, meant for the subscribers watching, to showcase the YouTube gamer's character and personality (Nguyen, 2016, p. 1). Videos typically show the gaming YouTuber's reactions to whatever game they are playing. Let's Plays also create a conversation within the gaming community based on the game play, the YouTuber's opinions in the game, and what game the subscribers want to see the YouTuber play next (Nguyen, 2016, p. 2). This enables the subscribers to have a say in content that will be shown on the YouTuber's channel.

Pietruszka (2016) addressed the overall popularity and rise of game-vlogging on YouTubers and why individuals find watching others play games online entertaining. Let's Plays game-vlogs (or video blogs) indirectly involve the audience in the actions of game play. Other types of videos include First Impressions, Reaction Videos, List Videos, How to Videos, and Skill Showcase (p. 56). The popularity of Let's Plays within the YouTube gaming community is estimated to comprise 15% of all videos uploaded (Blomqvist, Gonzalez, & Hu, 2016, p. 15). Based on popularity and success of such videos, some gaming YouTubers have around 5 million to 20 million subscribers such as GameGrumps, iHasCupquake, and Markiplier.

Gaming and social support: Therapeutic experiences

One unfamiliar with the culture and community of YouTube gaming might not assume a gaming YouTuber could aide an individual with depression or other mental illnesses (Westenberg, 2016, p. 19). These gaming YouTubers are often perceived as an emotional support system and/or opinion leader whose influence and presences is respected by subscribers (Blomqvist, Gonzalez, & Hu, 2016, p. 1). Though these gaming YouTubers do not possess the same opinion leader image or following as a politician or activist, their influence is still high within the gaming community.

Blomqvist, Gonzales, and Hu (2016) interviewed viewers about their preferred gaming YouTuber. One interviewee said they enjoyed watching a specific gamer for two years because of their quality content and funny demeanor. Another who had subscribed to a comedic gamer for 2-3 years said they believed the YouTuber respected and valued each of their subscribers, even though they may not know them personally (Blomqvist, Gonzalez, & Hu, 2016, p. 27). Both interviewees found their YouTuber trustworthy. Being trustworthy was one avenue that allowed subscribers to relate to them on a deeper level. Through sharing close personal stories outside or during game play, YouTubers begin to appear more approachable (Westenberg, 2016, p. 9). A third interviewee in Blomqvist's study spoke of their favorite gaming YouTuber who they had subscribed to for 3 years saying the YouTuber was deeply engrossed within the game play and began to cry at the end, which drew the subscriber in (Blomqvist, Gonzalez, & Hu, 2016, p. 28). Westenberg (2016) surmises the overall influence a range of YouTube celebrities and vloggers have on their young subscribers is that YouTubers are admired more than Hollywood celebrities because they seem more attainable (through advanced technology), relatable, and personal.

Theoretical Framework

Shared Mental Health Disclosure

Gaming YouTubers address mental health topics indirectly with their subscribers through a video camera in their studio. Though this process impacts the subscribers watching, it is also shown to aide the YouTuber who understands that their subscribers support their actions and choices (Blomqvist, Gonzalez, & Hu, 2016, p. 3). This approach is seen differently than that of a therapist (often perceived as a stranger) who first questions an individual or tries to understand their situation, because gaming YouTubers are often viewed as friends in part to the personal interactions the gaming YouTubers try to achieve through social media (Westenberg, 2016, p. 9).

Subscribers can get to know many things about their favorite gaming YouTuber when the creators make themselves vulnerable through their content. Through the trust that has been created by the gaming YouTuber revealing their own lives and answering questions, their subscribers do not feel shy to openly address their own issues in the comments section and how the gaming YouTuber aided them in their disclosures. Corrigan (2012) discussed the positive outcomes of openly discussing one's choices with others in hopes to find individuals who relate: "When people are open about their condition, worry and concern over secrecy is reduced; they may soon find peers or family members who will support them, even after knowing their condition, and they may find that their openness promotes a sense of power and control over their lives" (p. 466). Mental health story statements by subscribers are usually made within the comment section on a selected video. Because of its reach around the world (Westenberg, 2016), any YouTube subscriber, no matter where, can access their favorite gaming YouTuber and watch as long as they want (Pietruszka, 2016, p. 56).

Mental health self-disclosure in social media: A common trend

De Choudhury and De (2014) detail the experience of mental health self-disclosure on social media, specifically reddit, a social media platform that allows the public to share posts while others comment and vote on them, similar to making a comment on YouTube. The term mental illness is defined as “a kind of health concern where the value of emotional and pragmatic support as well as self-disclosure has been recognized over the years” (p. 71). Self-disclosure and social support combined have been discovered to help improve self-efficiency (p. 71).

Anonymity through using a pseudonym is a factor when disclosing on Reddit, allowing the participants to disclose or portray themselves differently online around unknown people than they would in any other setting (p. 77). Postings related to mental health self-disclosure range “from emotional and instrumental commentary, to informational and prescriptive advice” (79). Individuals self-disclose on Reddit regarding their personal mental illness, to find support from others facing the same issues, and to exchange health information to help others cope with problems. Though different for YouTube, Reddit disclosure shares similarities in the types of comments and the trend of mental health on social media platforms. While scholars are beginning to address mental health and YouTube, a deeper understanding of why individuals choose to self-disclose and what those experiences are like is warranted.

Self-disclosure can be defined as making oneself known to the public or others with information that may not have been revealed prior (Balani and De Choudhury, 2015, para. 4). In this case, *others* can be defined as YouTube gaming subscribers. When applying the “social stigmatic” pattern that follows mental illnesses, the action of self-disclosure can improve one’s health (para. 4). “Peer-to-peer” support on YouTube has been found to be beneficial (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, and Bartels, 2016, p. 114). This form of support on social media can be

observed “as one of the most transformational features on the Internet” being an aid for users in a way that can “promote recovery, self-esteem and mental and physical wellbeing” (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, and Bartels, 2016, p.114).

As noted above, studies have analyzed the use of social media to self-disclose their personal life publicly. But fewer studies have considered the gaming community on YouTube that aids individuals with mental health experiences. With the potential for user anonymity amidst the public identity of gaming YouTubers, YouTube affords both parties a shared experience of self-disclosure of mental health experiences (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, and Bartels, 2016, p.114). Gaming YouTubers are creating communities where the majority of subscribers are self-disclosing, opening the door for others to acknowledge they are not alone in their experiences (Balani and De Choudhury, 2015, para. 4). Let’s Plays, as well as other game-vlogging methods, serve as a source of relatability and humor that attract such audiences, making the YouTuber themselves appealing to the subscribers (Westenberg, 2016, p. 17).

Building upon studies have begun to explore YouTube and mental health relationships (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, and Bartels, 2016), this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the outcomes of gaming YouTubers who discuss topics such as depression, mental/physical health, and/or suicide with their subscribers either during game play or as a video on their gaming channel?

RQ2: Why do subscribers feel open to discuss their personal problems to these gaming YouTubers?

RQ3: Why do the gaming YouTubers choose to talk about such topics on their channel?

Methodology

Data were collected from August 2018 to October 2018. The methodological focus of qualitative interview research is not sample size but rather data saturation or repetition of themes (Coleman, 2007). According to previous qualitative methodological research, data saturation for interviewing participants is typically encountered between eight and 20 interviews, but as an exploratory undergraduate study, interview participants for this study were set at four (McCracken, 1993). Criteria for participation included YouTube subscribers from the United States or abroad who were 19 years of age or older and had commented on a video of a gaming YouTuber with one million subscribers or more about their own mental health experiences.

Due to participant response rate, the study was unable to collect data on RQ3. The four subscribers disclosed their own mental health experiences including depression, anxiety, suicide, and obsessive-compulsive disorder in YouTube comments directed toward a specific gaming YouTuber, GameGrumps, (Table 1) who had disclosed his own mental health experiences to his subscribers.

Table 1

Subscribers' Original YouTube Comments

Subscriber	YouTube Comment
S1	Hey guys. 5 years later huh. This episode still makes me cry. Having Major Depressive Disorder, Anxiety, and OCD together sucks. Hearing Dan talk about it. Not feeling so completely alone about it. I will cry every time I listen to this episode. Not because It hurts to hear it. Because... its healthy to let go. To not feel so alone trying to deal with it. To accept what I have.
S2	This has been an incredible episode. Dan said "I'm so happy now because I know what it's like to be sad". Frankly I find it hard to believe that something like that could happen to me. I've struggled with depression/anxiety for 3-4 years, and my good friend has struggled with similar issues for 10+ years, and most days it feels like there's no end in sight. But hey, hopefully things will get better. I love hearing Dan's voice telling me that it gets "way fucking better". I sure hope he's right. In any case, game grumps has got me through a lot. It's the thing I can

	come back to when shit gets hard that always makes me feel comfortable. This comment will probably get lost in the oblivion of youtube, but I really want you to know what you've done for me. Love you guys <3
S3	when i was in year 12 at school i had serious mental problems where i was always depressed and all through that year i kept thinking how i would kill myself but i wouldn't do it though then one night i had a panic attack and i nearly did go and take those pills so i could finally be happy, not in pain instead of doing that i went downstairs and talked to my mum about what i was going through i've seen countless councillors as i find that they all have different ways of approaching situations a school councillor told me to take a rubber band to slap my wrists with it instead of cutting myself another told me my relationship with my dad was not worth saving, same lady who helped my dad and one of my sisters to fix their relationships it took me 2 years after i finished school to find out what works for me and a whole lot of hours spent watching 13 reasons why to acknowledge what happened and what could have happened but in the last couple of weeks i fell back into mental place that i took so long to get out of someone asked me how i was and i told them i felt anxious and she asked me about my past mental history. i told her in 2015 i was severely depressed and having suicidal thoughts. she told me i was being selfish for thinking that way. i wasn't being selfish, i genuinely thought that if no one wanted me around at school, my family must hate me. i know they don't but when your in that mindset of where i was, nothing seems selfish, it seems like your doing the right thing i'm a lot happier right now because of YouTube and YouTubers who distract me and give me something to look forward to each day
S4	This whole series, and this episode specifically, has given me such a profound respect for these two. I honestly almost cried during this episode because, while I didn't have OCD, I've struggled with a lot of things and I really felt like I could relate to Danny.

Data Analysis

On August 22, 2018 recruitment with subscribers began. Subscribers were identified through a YouTube search through gaming YouTuber's video comments up until 5 years ago. Using the direct messaging platform through YouTube, the research contacted subscribers who had attached their Google+ account, business email, or social media handle. If such contact information was not provided, the subscribers were not included in the study. Initial contact was made through the researcher's existing YouTube account and over 20 subscribers and four

gaming YouTubers were contacted via various messaging methods. Of the 20+ subscribers and four gaming YouTubers, six subscribers responded and four participated in the study.

Via email, subscribers confirmed they were over 19 and subscribed to the gaming YouTuber's channel they had initially commented on. Written consent was obtained from each participant one week prior to the interview per the researcher's university institutional review board. Participants were informed they would not be identified in the study. The four subscribers participated in either a Skype, phone, or email interview. Interviews ranged from 10 to 30 minutes. Skype interviews were utilized for the primary interview contact. For Skype interviews, QuickTime was utilized to record the video and audio for transcription. Phone and email interviews were utilized for those unable to Skype due to a geographical time difference. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Express Scribe. Interviews were then coded into specific categories that represented the meaning and essence of reoccurring topics (Tracy, 2013, p. 189). After consultation with a supervising faculty member, codes were parsed into themes to fully answer the research questions.

Excerpts from interviews are excised below to showcase themes which answer the research questions. While the subscribers commented their experiences publicly, I refer to them below using the codes S1 through S4 to protect their identities about their mental health disclosures which they discussed in more depth in interviews as compared with their initial YouTube comment online.

Findings

RQ1: What are the outcomes of gaming YouTubers who discuss topics such as depression, mental/physical health, and/or suicide with their subscribers either during game play or as a video on their gaming channel?

Gaming YouTube subscribers voluntarily chose to disclose their mental health story on GameGrumps' comment section of one of his videos where he disclosed personal information about himself. Within commenting, subscribers aimed to show support for other individuals who are also experiencing mental health problems who choose to not disclose on YouTube. This was to create a positive experience for both the subscriber who is sharing their experience and the individual who sees the subscriber's comment.

Positive experiences: "Letting go is a powerful thing...But the longer you deal with it, the more you bottle it up, and occasionally, you just have to let go."

All subscribers agreed that commenting was positive. As well as acknowledging that once one's comment is on the internet, it is up to anyone's interpretation. S2 explained how "at first, I was a little bit nervous" about the process and end result of commenting, but later explained how "I had done something with my desires to tell Dan and Arin that 'hey, you guys did something good for me'" (September 2018). Similar to that comment, S3 said the emotional experience was the reason why they felt the action of commenting as positive: "I always feel better about sharing what I've been through as I hope that whoever reads it learns something or if GameGrumps did ever see it that they know there are people who benefit from them making videos" (October 2018).

When asked what participants wanted to do after making the initial YouTube comment, S1 said that they "felt like making a much, much longer version on Facebook trying to explain it to [their] family and friends," and that the entire experience "pulls up the memories," but in the end when "facing it head-on and acknowledging it is freeing" (September, 2018).

Not alone: "You're not just saying it to say it, you're saying it because maybe somebody else who needs to see it is reading."

Subscribers chose to disclose information about themselves on GameGrumps' comment section because it made them feel as if they were not alone. Much of this encouragement came from GameGrumps who put himself in a vulnerable position first when discussing his mental health story. For S4 said that after "hearing his experience, I felt like it's okay to come forward with this kind of things" (October 2018). After hearing about what GameGrumps went through mentally and emotionally and seeing other comments, the subscribers felt more comfortable talking about their own stories and struggles.

I think the action of posting something and just knowing that people see it and that people are supportive...like when I post something I'm not looking for advice or anything like that. But, like, just the fact that I know people have seen it and like on Facebook they like it or whatever, gives me this kind of feeling of solidarity. I am not really alone. (S2, September 2018).

Subscribers chose to disclose personal information and stories about their own mental health history on GameGrumps' page not only for their own healing but to aid others who may be reading and are not ready to express their own feelings publicly. S3 said "I've always been open talking about depression and suicide in hopes that if there's someone out there that might possibly feel the way I did, that they know there's help and you can get it" (October 2018). S2, when asked about commenting on YouTube and other social outlets, said "part of the reason why I share too on social media is I want to share something to also help other people" (September 2018).

S1 explained the experience of remembering the video by the gaming YouTuber and readdressing it to hopefully help themselves as well as others, saying "it's a bad combination and it's really easy to feel alone. It's really easy to forget that you're not the only one who has experienced those things and to just let it eat at you, 'that you're broken,' that's not the way you are supposed to be. No one is supposed to think like that," and that being able to hear someone

talk about the experience and success on this topic “breaks that little thought you put in your own mind that you’re the one who’s broken, that nobody else feels like this. That it’s all your fault somehow” (September 2018).

S4 also commented on the experience of seeing GameGrumps’ mental health struggle and success story:

I think it did help a but because it’s this person that I feel closely connected to and it’s normal...it’s like, it’s okay that you’ve been through these thinks and knowing that he is so much older than me and his life has gotten so much better. Like I am currently fine, but it does give me good help for the future as well (October 2018).

RQ2: Why do subscribers feel open to discuss their personal problems to these gaming YouTubers?

Understanding *why* the subscribers felt comfortable or willing to disclose their personal mental health stories publicly is equally imperative as the story itself. Subscribers’ main comments dealing with the idea of disclosure were about being able to hide their face on YouTube anonymously without having the consequence of someone trying to track them. The other reason for comfortable disclosure was due to a level of relatability they felt toward GameGrumps, making the idea of commenting feel like a conversation.

Anonymity. Majority of the subscribers described the experience of disclosing their personal life as easier due to the anonymity YouTube provides them. Subscribers do not need to sign into their YouTube account under their legal name or link their other personal social media accounts to their YouTube account. All that is required to comment is a valid email address, which is also hidden from the public if one desires to hide it. Some subscribers addressed this specifically:

[My] account is not connected to my real name. Facebook doesn’t really have any way to follow someone based on their comments and see the other things they commented. So,

when you say something, you're just saying it. Like saying something out loud in a crowded room full of people that will never see you again (S1, September 2018).

S2 noted: "If I commented on something on Facebook, then I hear back from my friends, but when I comment on YouTube, I am hearing back from like random strangers and I really don't care" (September 2018).

Subscribers also spoke about disclosing on other social media platforms after commenting on YouTube, and the overall differences the experience brings. S3 said, "I've never really talked about my depression on social media...but it's hard when you know our family will see it, especially knowing my grandparents will see. It's easier for me to do on a YouTube comment because my family won't see that" (October 2018). This is due to the difference in privacy and disclosure based on the information and connections within both media outlets.

S2 also commented on anonymity and the dangers of disclosing information and possible stigma of mental health on the Internet:

Because if it's on Facebook or something I know, kind of my friends, I know who's gonna see it. So, it will be easier to engage how they're going to react to something. But when it's just the wide-open internet and there are people of all sorts...opinions and, it makes [me] a little bit nervous, you know? People get crucified on the internet all the time for the littlest things, and so now, even if what I am trying to say is good, even if my intentions are good, the way you say it, I find, is very important on the Internet too (September 2018).

Relatability and comfort: "You get to know them, and you can't help but rationalize that, to a certain degree, they are your friend."

Subscribers saw GameGrumps as being close to them like a friend due to the large amount of information the subscriber knew about him.

But I also think it sets up an odd sort of relationship between subscribers and content creators. You know all these personal details about someone's life. You get to know them, and you can't help but rationalize that, to a certain degree, they are your friend. But the flip side of that is, they know nothing about you. They've never met you and you have a weirdly intimate one-sided relationship (S1, September 2018).

The overall openness of GameGrumps and the vulnerability shown on both sides creates the relatable nature that makes disclosure possible. S1 shared that GameGrumps is “willing to share personal stories as long as they don’t give information about other people,” and that “he seems willing to share about himself” (September 2018). S3 said that what got their attention was how the gaming YouTuber was “still able to engage with the audience without the face cam and just being themselves” (October 2018). S1 also commented on the topic of the therapeutic nature of the experience when utilizing YouTube for help: “Feels more like a device you can use to help yourself and less like someone is analyzing you and trying to categorize you” (September 2018).

Participants also spoke about the comfort of talking with someone they know and relating to him rather than a stranger at a therapy session: “It can be a lot harder to approach that than to just watch someone else talk about what they went through and how they got over it and see if thinking it through the same way helps you” (S1, September 2018). And most participants, along with seeing GameGrumps as a friend, said they felt connected to him more than that of a Hollywood celebrity. S2, S3, and S4 illustrated this point:

But they just feel very distant. I mean, maybe part of it is because in movies they’re acting a character or playing a character. Whereas if you’re on a YouTube channel, they’re just sharing their own experience. There’s this kind of vulnerability that comes from being someone on YouTube. You know, you are your own personality and not acting something else. That’s a big part of why (S2, September 2018).

As people watch a YouTuber’s videos, they get an understanding of who they really are, and they feel more like a friend than a stranger. I feel like there are celebrities out there that are very open, and we can relate to them, but they won’t connect to their fans like the way a YouTuber can with their audience (S3, October 2018).

I think Hollywood celebrities end up feeling very distant. They feel very distant. I feel like they are on a higher pedestal than YouTubers who, many of which consciously try to have them show up on the same level as other people (S4, October 2018).

The concept of relatability goes deeper when analyzing how these gaming YouTubers have helped their subscriber. Subscribers discussed their last thoughts and emotions toward their gaming YouTuber: “I know some of your stories are deeply personal and I know thinking about them brings up painful memories for me, so I can only imagine how it is for you. But I appreciate you sharing them nonetheless” (S1, September 2018). S2 agreed: “I want them to know that they’ve helped me and that, just like, they’re doing good stuff. I wish I could meet them” (September 2018). S4, too, commented on the way the gaming YouTuber presented themselves to their subscribers, making the connection stronger: “I guess I’d just like to say thanks for being there and having such a great channel and presenting yourself in such a way that feels so relatable and close to everyone” (October 2018).

Discussion and Conclusion

Through the usage of interviews and gaming YouTube searches, this study aimed to understand why and how mental health disclosure happens within the YouTube gaming community and if it is beneficial for the subscribers disclosing publicly. Findings show those who chose to disclose their mental health story did so for their own benefit as well as for the benefit of others reading. Most subscribers stated how their choice of disclosure led to self-guidance, self-awareness, and relief they were not the only ones experiencing difficulties in their lives. Results also showed how important the presence of a public figure who sometimes puts themselves in a vulnerable situation online, i.e. gaming YouTubers, is in the lives of those who watch, relate, and choose to be open about their experiences dealing with mental health.

Subscribers felt more inclined to tell their mental health story once someone they trusted and felt connected to chose to tell theirs first, like GameGrumps. Though self-disclosure creates the fear of “discrimination by members of the public,” research agrees that though the stigma

toward mental health exists, “broadcasting one’s experience means educating people about mental illness” (Corrigan, 2012, p. 466). Even though anonymity was a working factor for most of the participants who commented, that did not take away from the importance that they felt about getting their voice out there, even if it meant only one or two people would see it. This was mostly due to the gaming YouTuber and the one-sided relationship shared which made the exchange possible in the first place. Though therapy was mentioned within this research, this study does not discourage the action of seeking therapy but recognizes the benefit of other outlets when disclosing about one’s mental illness, especially if the one suffering with the mental illness can relate to other parties.

Subscribers’ choice of mental health disclosure was done not only for their benefit, but for the benefit of those who do not comment or share. Just as the gaming YouTuber chose to share, a cycle/trend had surfaced where others felt comfortable to disclose. This not only strengthens the gaming community to that gaming YouTuber but is also a sign of fighting the stigma of mental health. For gaming YouTubers and their subscribers, this relationship is nothing new. Some of these relationships may develop before the gaming YouTuber reaches one million subscribers.

Limitations

While the subscribers in this study represented those who have disclosed personal stories in the comments section of a gaming YouTuber, not all data and themes within the study reflect all subscribers who comment on YouTube. Though I reached gender parity within sampling, data collection did not include questions on race, ethnicity, or specific age. Future studies should review participants from a wider range. This study also did not cover those who are younger than 19-years-old who commented about their mental health story. Future research should include

those younger than 19 to understand their point-of-view. Though the initial goal was to interview both gaming YouTubers and subscribers, I was only able to collect data from subscribers.

Therefore, it would be beneficial for future studies to understand the gaming YouTuber's reasons for disclosure as well as their influence. Also, within this study, all subscribers came from the same gaming YouTuber, GameGrumps. Though experiences matched within this study, other experiences and disclosure stories based on other gaming YouTubers should be explored.

Finally, the study interviewed participants from Western countries (United States and Australia).

Future research should interview YouTube subscribers from Eastern countries.

Implications for Research

This study investigated not only the act of commenting on YouTube, but the discussion about the stigma surrounding mental health. These findings serve as future research questions surrounding self-disclosure, public health, and mental and physical illness for latter exploration. I hope the comments made by the subscribers (see Table) and the disclosure information found in interviews provide a path for this discussion to continue, not only on YouTube but disclosure within other outlets that allow both the giver and receiver of mental health disclosure to understand they are not alone and that disclosing could provide liberation. Lastly, as mental health disclosure becomes more prevalent on social media and video-sharing platforms such as YouTube, researchers and participants in disclosure should aid in normalizing the act of disclosing on media platforms as well as eradicating the stigma of mental illnesses, just as these subscribers and many others have done.

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August 8, 2018

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IRB # 500-18-EP

TITLE OF PROPOSAL: Trying to Save the Game(r): The Emotional and Psychological Relationship between Gaming YouTuber and Subscriber

DATE OF EXPEDITED REVIEW: 07/17/2018

DATE OF FINAL APPROVAL AND RELEASE: 08/08/2018 **VALID UNTIL:** 07/17/2019

CLASSIFICATION OF RISK: Minimal

EXPEDITED CATEGORY OF REVIEW: 45 CFR 46.110; 21 CFR 56.110, Category 6, 7

The IRB has completed its review of the above-titled protocol. The IRB has determined you are in compliance with HHS Regulations (45 CFR 46), applicable FDA Regulations (21 CFR 50, 56) and the Organization's HRPP policies. Furthermore, the IRB is satisfied you have provided adequate safeguards for protecting the rights and welfare of the subjects to be involved in this study. This letter constitutes official notification of final approval and release of your project by the IRB. You are authorized to implement this study as of the above date of final approval.

Please be advised that only the IRB approved and stamped consent form(s) can be used to make copies to enroll subjects. Also, at the time of consent all subjects must be given a copy of *The Rights of Research Subjects* and "What Do I Need to Know" forms.

The IRB wishes to remind you that the PI is ultimately responsible for ensuring that this research is conducted in full compliance with the protocol, applicable Federal Regulations, and Organizational policies.

Finally, under the provisions of this institution's Federal Wide Assurance (FWA00002939), the PI is directly responsible for submitting to the IRB any proposed change in the research or the consent form(s)/information sheet(s). In addition, any adverse events, unanticipated problems involving risk to the subject or others, noncompliance, and complaints must be promptly reported to the IRB in accordance with HRPP policies.

This project is subject to periodic review and surveillance by the IRB and, as part of the Board's surveillance, the IRB may request periodic progress reports. For projects which continue beyond one year, it is the responsibility of the PI to initiate a request to the IRB for continuing review and update of the research project.

On behalf of the IRB,

Signed on: 2018-08-08 10:17:00.000

Bryan Ludwig, BA
IRB Administrator II
Office of Regulatory Affairs

cc: Bruce G. Gordon M.D.
IRB Executive Chair