

8-3-2020

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Trying to save the game(r): Understanding the self-disclosure of YouTube subscribers surrounding mental health in video-game vlog comments

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To cite this article: Maria S. Mickles & Andrea M. Weare (2020) Trying to save the game(r): Understanding the self-disclosure of YouTube subscribers surrounding mental health in video-game vlog comments, *Southern Communication Journal*, 85:4, 231-243, DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2020.1798494>

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the self-disclosure of YouTube subscribers surrounding mental health and their relationship with YouTube gamer co-hosts Dan Avidan and Arin Hanson of the channel Game Grumps. Via 10 subscriber interviews, this study sheds light on viewers' motivations to subscribe to Game Grumps and to self-disclose mental-health struggles and what the implications for disclosing on YouTube are. Results revealed two overarching motivations and implications that embody mental-health disclosure on social media: (a) subscribers disclose a variety of mental-health experiences and provide the language to "own" them in a public space online and (b) disclosures make visible some subscribers' coping processes and aim to mobilize others to create their own.

KEYWORDS

Game Grumps; gaming; mental health; self-disclosure; YouTube

As one of the most popular video media platforms, YouTube has allowed content creators to showcase a breadth of evolving video content worldwide since 2005 (Burgess et al., 2009). Creators produce videos that attract audiences of different ages and geographic locations and over time build bonds between creators and subscribers to communicate and engage in the comments section (Westenberg, 2016). Such has been the case for many YouTube gamers who, over several years, have accumulated large followings in a practice called game vlogging (Pietruszka, 2016).

Gaming vloggers play various video games while recording their reactions on camera for viewers and use humor to add “color,” making their channel’s content unique (Westenberg, 2016). Some YouTube gamers also serve as social support to subscribers surrounding experiences with mental health. Support can range from charity involvement; playing a mental or physical health-themed video game; or recording monologues about depression, suicide, or an illness such as cancer (Daz Games, 2013; Game Grumps, 2012; iHasCupquake, 2010; Jacksepticeye, 2007; Markiplier, 2012). These mental-health gaming YouTubers share challenges and troubles they have overcome by allowing viewers into their lives (Westenberg, 2016). The support is then reciprocated by viewers who leave comments, start a discussion, like and share links, and subscribe to the YouTuber’s channel (Pietruszka, 2016).

This study analyzed the self-disclosure of YouTube subscribers surrounding mental health and their relationship with YouTube gamer co-hosts Dan Avidan and Arin Hanson of the channel Game Grumps. Avidan and Hanson disclose their personal mental-health challenges in YouTube gaming videos and have gained a following of over 5 million subscribers since 2019 (Game Grumps, 2019). This study focused on social media uses within this YouTube gaming community by emphasizing the process of self-disclosure and its barriers and stigma as well as the benefits of

social support. It is understood that the stigma surrounding mental health discourages individuals from disclosing or seeking help (Henderson et al., 2017). However, as our study corroborates, the barriers to mental health self-disclosure minimize in the presence of a social and emotional support community (De Choudhury & De, 2014).

Overall, the study sheds light on the stigma surrounding mental health, the individuals aiming to combat it, and what the outcomes of their methods are. In doing so, it revealed why and to what end mental-health disclosures occur specifically in Let's Play game vlogs within the gaming community. Specifically, it lays bare 10 subscribers' motivations to subscribe to Game Grumps and self-disclose mental-health struggles in the comment section. The interview data also define gratifications sought by subscribers in their efforts to follow these gaming YouTube celebrities who have been found in past studies to be both more admirable and more relatable than traditional Hollywood celebrities (Westenberg, 2016).

“Let's plays” and social support

Let's Play game vlogs, one particular type of video-game vlog, indirectly involve the audience in the actions of game play through the use of a comments section while watching a video-game vlogger play a game. Nguyen (2016) defined Let's Play videos as those that allow the gamer to play a game and record their reactions, while the viewer watches from home. In most cases, the gamer speaks to the camera while playing the game and shares insight and suggestions about the game as if the gamer is speaking directly to the viewer. The popularity of Let's Plays within the YouTube gaming community is estimated to comprise 15% of all videos uploaded (Gonzalez et al., 2016). Based on the popularity and success of Let's Plays, some gaming YouTubers such as Markiplier, VanossGaming, CaptainSparklz, and Pewdiepie have accumulated over 10 million subscribers each, showcasing the high interest viewers have in watching others play (Pietruszka, 2016).

Let's Plays are uniquely classified as a performance to showcase the YouTube gamer's character and personality (Nguyen, 2016). The amount of commentary and choice of an intro and outro in a video help brand the gaming YouTuber with a trademark or certain phrase (Pietruszka, 2016). Let's Plays create a conversation within the gaming community about the specifications of games, the YouTuber's opinions of the games, and suggestions on what games subscribers want to see next (Nguyen, 2016). This engagement affords subscribers a say in the type of content to come.

It is difficult to discern on the surface how a gaming YouTuber may help a subscriber who is experiencing mental-health challenges (Westenberg, 2016). Yet, studies have shown YouTubers are often perceived by their viewers as opinion leaders whose influence and consistent presence are desired as part of a larger system of emotional support (Gonzalez et al., 2016). Though gaming YouTubers may not possess the same opinion leader status as celebrities, politicians, or medical professionals who more commonly influence mental-health policy agendas, gaming YouTuber influence is high within the gaming community.

For example, Westenberg (2016) surmises that YouTubers are admired more than Hollywood celebrities because they seem more attainable or reachable through advanced technology. In a 2016 interview study with viewers about their preferred gaming YouTuber, one participant reported believing that the gaming YouTuber respected and valued each of his or her subscribers even though the gamer might not have known the subscribers personally (Gonzalez et al., 2016). Others in the study saw gaming YouTubers as trustworthy and authentic, such as when they show their emotions on camera (e.g., crying at the end of a game) (Gonzalez et al., 2016).

Theoretical framework

To understand motivations for self-disclosure, it is necessary to jointly understand a viewer's uses for and gratifications of a social-media platform since "individuals seek out media that fulfill their needs" leading "to ultimate gratification" (Whiting & Williams, 2013, p. 363). Thus, this study utilized a theoretical bricolage of self-disclosure (Balani & De Choudhury, 2015) and social-media uses and gratifications (Whiting & Williams, 2013). This framework allowed for an exploration of (a) motivations and implications for subscribing and subsequently disclosing mental-health experiences in the comments section of Game Grumps and (b) gratifications sought from co-hosts Avidan and Hanson. Whiting and Williams (2013) summarize seven themes concerning why individuals gravitate to social-media usage, four of which are suited to self-disclosure and were supported by the findings of this study: (a) social interaction such as finding others to relate to and interact with (e.g., finding a community); (b) entertainment, a form of escapism wherein one finds humor, comic relief, and an escape from other influences; (c) information seeking, self-education, answers/comfort for questions; and (d) convenience, utility, the ability to access social-media platforms and communicate with others anywhere and anytime (p. 364).

Peer-to-peer support, such as that established in YouTube comments, has been found to be beneficial to health outcomes "as one of the most transformational features on the Internet" by being an aid for users in a way that can "promote recovery, self-esteem and mental and physical wellbeing" (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 114). Corrigan and Rao (2012) discussed self-disclosure and the positive outcomes of openly discussing one's mental health in hopes of finding individuals who relate, stating that when individuals choose to be open about their experiences, worry or fear is reduced. In the case of Game Grumps, those individuals include fellow subscribers and viewers reading the comments section.

Mental-health self-disclosure can range from "emotional and

instrumental commentary” to “informational and prescriptive advice” (De Choudhury & De, 2014, p. 79). Individuals may self-disclose to find support from others facing the same issues or to exchange health information in the hope of helping others cope. De Choudhury and De (2014) found mental-health self-disclosure on the popular platform Reddit as similar to making a comment and/or liking a comment on YouTube. Their findings revealed that stigma surrounding mental health and mental illnesses led individuals to become “guarded about what they reveal about their condition” but that anonymous self-disclosure combined with social support improved feelings of self-efficacy (De Choudhury & De, 2014, p. 71).

For the purpose of this study, mental health was defined as the overall well-being of an individual including one’s emotional, psychological, and social state (World Health Organization, 2018). Mental illnesses were defined as “medical conditions . . . that disrupt a person’s thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others, and daily functioning” (Smith & Cashwell, 2010, p. 189). Gaming YouTubers are creating communities in which subscribers are self-disclosing and opening a door for others to demonstrate that they do not stand alone in their experiences (Balani & De Choudhury, 2015). According to Westenberg (2016), Let’s Plays, in particular, can serve as a source of mental-health relatability and humor that attracts such disclosures, making disclosing more approachable. Such is the case with gaming YouTuber’s like Game Grumps who intentionally discuss mental health and disclose themselves.

In contrast to traditional therapy, gaming YouTubers are more likely to be viewed as friends, in part due to the personal and humorous interactions they weave into their channel. This “digital-self,” according to Chen (2016), enables the gaming YouTuber to engage in “complex intra-self-negotiation” to present a desired impression (p. 233). Digitally, some gaming YouTubers participate in self-presentation and self-expression,

or “the degree to which people make themselves vulnerable through the social performance identity” (p. 234). When their subscribers then comment below a video, they, too, are expressing their digital selves. Because content on YouTube has the ability to reach around the world, any YouTube subscriber with an Internet connection can access a gaming YouTuber and, by extension, strengthen their shared relationship (Pietruszka, 2016).

The notion that YouTubers are sought out because they are more “approachable” than traditional celebrities, for example, is characterized as a parasocial relationship, or a relationship formed through media consumption with a person one does not know (de Bérail et al., 2019). This is commonly seen between a spectator and a performer (Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016). Parasocial relationships are one-sided in their development on the part of the YouTuber subscriber, in this case, as compared to traditional social relations that are reciprocal (de Bérail et al., 2019). Though gaming YouTubers and subscribers often express gratitude toward one another, they rarely know one another personally.

Parasocial relationships do develop between fans and traditional celebrities, but Chen (2016) notes a more prominent connectivity between YouTubers and their subscribers. Gaming YouTubers who perform Let’s Plays, for example, build community through parallel social media platforms like Twitter or Twitch and events like meet-and-greets such as VidCon. On the whole, Chen (2016) notes gaming YouTubers are generally more available to their audience due to sharing their personal life beyond traditional Let’s Play videos, which can heighten the parasocial bond.

While scholars are beginning to address mental-health disclosure on YouTube, a deeper understanding of why individuals subscribe to particular channels, why they disclose, and the meanings they assign to those experiences is needed. Few studies have considered YouTube’s

gaming community that helps individuals with mental-health experiences. Building upon studies that explore YouTube and mental-health conversations (Naslund et al., 2016), this study answered the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. What motivates Game Grumps viewers to (a) subscribe and (b) self-disclose mental-health experiences?

RQ2. What are the implications for sharing such mental-health experiences on YouTube?

Method

Data collection

Qualitative interview data were collected from August 2018 to February 2020. Criteria for participation were being age 19 years or older and being a YouTube subscriber to Game Grumps who had commented on the video “Wind Waker HD: Fresh Air—Part 19—Game Grumps” regarding their own mental-health experience (Game Grumps, 2013). “Wind Waker HD,” which aired November 2013, was selected as the nexus for participant recruitment because it is a unique “dialogue” of (a) shared mental-health disclosures by the Game Grumps co-hosts and (b) elicited shared mental-health disclosures by subscribers in the comments section. Subscribers were first identified through a comments search for mental-health disclosures backdated to November 2013, when the video first aired. Next, eligible participants were contacted via the “Contact” data provided in their YouTube channel (e.g., personal or business email, social media handle, Google+ account, etc.). If no contact information was provided, the individual was not pursued.

Initial contact was made to over 50 subscribers, of which 15 responded and 10 were eligible and participated in the study (three female participants, seven male participants, with an age range of 19 to 27 years). Due to the low response rate and a lack of subscribers who provided contact information on their account, we were unable to recruit

more than 10 eligible participants. The methodological focus of qualitative interview research is not sample size but rather data saturation, or repetition of themes, often encountered between eight and 20 participants (Coleman, 2007), and the content of our interviews began to repeat by the tenth interview.

Once participant eligibility was reconfirmed and written consent was obtained from each participant per the researchers' institutional review board, interviews were conducted (due to the global spread of participants) via Skype, Discord, phone, and email as needed. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were audio- and video-recorded (when applicable) for transcription via ExpressScribe and Temi.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the constant-comparative method to develop a thematic analysis to answer the research questions surrounding disclosure motivations and implications (Glaser, 1965). In the first phase of data analysis, the participant's YouTube comment (Appendix A) and transcript were read by the authors to create "immersion" (Tracy, 2013). Next, the authors engaged in open-coding (Charmaz, 2006) to gain a grounded understanding of the participants' mental-health disclosure (Appendix A) in relation to their interview. Re-reading and categorizing the data allowed the authors to generate specific codes, which became representatives of the meaning and essence of motivations and implications (Tracy, 2013). After consultation between the authors, codes (e.g., "doesn't use real name on YouTube") were surfaced into themes (e.g., significance of anonymity) to fully represent the data and answer the research questions posed, resulting in four key themes: (a) posting is a positive experience, (b) combating another's loneliness, (c) anonymity affordances, and (d) relatability builds community.

In the second phase of data analysis, we reflected upon the

themes and data to determine the applicability of the themes and how they fit the literature on mental-health–self-disclosure and social media gratifications to ensure they were analytical, not simply descriptive. This second phase allowed us to consolidate themes (Reissman, 2008) into two key motivations and implications that embody mental-health disclosure experiences in Game Grumps’ YouTube comments: (a) subscribers disclose (by modeling the Game Grumps co-hosts) a variety of mental-health experiences and provide a language to “own” them in a public space and (b) disclosures make visible some subscribers’ coping processes and aim to mobilize others to create their own.

Results

The participants’ mental-health disclosures ranged from depression, anxiety, suicide, obsessive- compulsive disorder, and other mental illnesses. Excerpts from interviews are excised below to showcase the four themes and corroborate key motivations and implications. While the subscribers posted their experiences publicly, we refer to them using pseudonyms selected by the authors to protect their identity since their mental-health disclosures were discussed more intimately in inter- views than in their initial YouTube comment (Appendix A).

Posting is a positive experience

All 10 participants reflected back on their experience posting under the “Wind Waker HD” video as a positive one. After disclosing in the comments section, participants felt more positive about the Game Grumps co-hosts and their decision to subscribe to the channel: “I was . . . thankful for Game Grumps because it’s helped me through some difficult periods” (Mateo, male, 20, February 2020).

Arturo (male, 20) reported that Avidan and Hanson have helped a lot. They’ve made me realise that getting help when needed is not a sign of weakness, and that there are many people who are qualified and are available to help me and many others . . . I can’t thank them enough for how they changed my life for the

better. It really is amazing how close I feel to two people I've never met in real life.
(February 2020)

Some also uniquely praised Let's Plays for being a space for self-disclosure:

Mental Health is extremely important to me. Like many other people, I have anxiety and depression. Talking about that along with how Let's Plays, a form of entertainment that can make me feel better just by relaxing and listening to people having fun, is extremely fascinating to me. To Arin: You have inspired me to work as hard as I can. You've inspired my art and my career choice. To Dan: You're nearly constant good attitude is remarkable. You're empathetic but wise, silly but forgiving. I aspire to be even half as compassionate and kind as you. (Max, male, 21, February 2020)

Many acknowledged that once their comment was on the Internet, it was then open to anyone's interpretation: "At first, I was a little bit nervous" about the process and end result of commenting, but later felt "I had done something with my desires to tell Dan and Arin that 'Hey, you guys did something good for me'" (Bob, male, 24, September 2018). Kari (female, 20) stated: "I always feel better about sharing what I've been through as I hope that whoever reads it learns something or if Game Grumps did ever see it that they know there are people who benefit from them making videos" (October 2018).

After posting, Cody (male, age undisclosed) "felt like making a much, much longer version on Facebook trying to explain it to family and friends" and that "facing it head-on and acknowledging it is freeing" (September 2018). Megan (female, 21) felt similar that "being able to open up instead of holding everything inside and bottle it up was way more healthy" than not disclosing (February 2020). Mateo (male, 20) noted that sharing "and not necessarily get[ting] any flack for it . . . felt like there was a big weight off my chest" (February 2020).

Within commenting, participants aimed to create a positive experience for

both themselves and the reader. Participants' positive experience with posting supported Whiting and Williams's (2013) conclusion that, of the many uses sought and gratifications obtained in social media use, we do use social media to find others to relate to and interact with, even if we never meet them offline. As Bob (male, 24) put it, "I want them to know that they've helped me . . . I wish I could meet them," a sentiment shared with many participants (September 2018).

Combating another's loneliness

Participants described their motivation to disclose their mental-health experiences because Avidan and Hanson had combatted feeling alone by being candid on camera: "I felt relieved, because I saw that I wasn't the only one sharing their emotions and struggles" (Arturo, male, 20, February 2020). Avidan and Hanson were seen as "doing relatively well" but "real"—unlike celebrities—because they voiced mental-health struggles, too, which Mateo (male, 20) said was "reassuring" (February 2020). Raven (female, 19) noted that after "hearing his [Avidan's] experience, I felt like it's okay to come forward with this kind of things" (October 2018). Posting their comment was a way to model Avidan and Hanson's candor about mental health, which felt like an act of solidarity: "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 . . . gives me this kind of feeling of solidarity. I am not really alone" (Bob, male, 24, September 2018). Tucker (male, 23) also aimed to model Avidan's disclosure in the hope of helping the next viewer: "I saw the benefits [in commenting] more so because, you know, Danny's story touched a lot of people and, you know, maybe to a significantly smaller degree, mine can do the same thing" (February 2020).

Participants hoped their comment would create a language for "owning" mental-health experiences so that others could also combat loneliness, especially those not willing to comment publicly: "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" (Kari, female, 20, October 2018). Bob (male, 24) 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). Tucker (male, 23) agreed about the relief of finding others to relate to in the comments section:

The things that I felt in the past, you know, like obviously OCD and Asperger's [are] two very different things, but the main gist of the whole point of Dan's story is the same as mine and that is you get more comfortable with yourself once you have answers to why you are the way you are. (February 2020)

Megan (female, 21) aimed to lessen the stigma of mental-health–self-disclosure after viewing "Wind Waker HD" and leaving this comment:

I used to be previously closed off about mental health issues, but . . . I'm a lot more comfortable about speaking about such issues because . . . in the clip . . . he was talking openly about his mental health which [helps] destigmatize a lot of how depression is presented to the people . . . I do relate to Danny, even though we've never met. (February 2020)

Tucker (male, 23) agreed that Avidan's own disclosure in the video was a model for those in the comments section because it just came so naturally to everybody because . . . Dan kinda opened the flood gates with his story. And suddenly it wasn't taboo to talk about, you know, what makes you different and what makes your life challenging. So, I honestly didn't have any sort of fear. (February 2020)

Participants felt comfortable disclosing in part due to the "relatability" of Avidan and Hanson but also to join in on a "conversation" with the co-hosts. This particular action captured the development of the subscribers' parasocial relationship with the co-hosts to combat their own loneliness and represent other subscribers who did not comment (Cohen, 2003). Though the subscribers knew the co-hosts were not talking to them directly, the relatability the subscribers felt listening to the co-hosts' personal stories created a

conversation-like environment.

Anonymity affordances

While participants were motivated to model Avidan's and Hanson's self-disclosures in the comments section, they agreed that doing so was made possible by the anonymity YouTube affords. Participants felt they could safely disclose in YouTube's comments section anonymously, lessening the consequence of someone identifying them. YouTube commenters do not need to sign in to comment. All that is required to comment is a valid Google account (Gmail), which is also hidden from the public if the account holder desires. Participants credited these platform features often:

There's two major parts to what makes it easy to share there. One is simple, anonymity. Account is not connected to my real name . . . So when you say something, you're just saying it. It's like saying something out loud in a crowded room full of people that will never see you again. (Cody, male, age undisclosed, September 2018)

Mateo (male, 20) agreed: "I'd probably feel a little bit more weird about [commenting] if like it was less anonymous. I mean, even though my profile picture is like technically a picture of me, it's just a pixel version of me" (February 2020). YouTube "feels more like a device you can use to help yourself and less like someone is analyzing you and trying to categorize you" (Cody, male, age undisclosed, September 2018). Unlike therapy, participants felt it was easier 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" (Cody, male, age undisclosed, September 2018).

Even though Avidan and Hanson are not anonymous, participants stated that they themselves could still model their disclosure while maintaining anonymity, which is not always possible on other platforms like Facebook: "They [Dan and Arin] really help because on the internet I have anonymity. I can be honest about my feelings . . . Dan and Arin have given me reasons to feel confident and happy" (Max, male, 21, February 2020). Bob (male, 24) agreed regarding the

anonymity YouTube provides: “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). Kari (female, 20) mentioned: “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).

Tucker (male, 23) added that YouTube’s anonymous commenting also softened the blow if feedback from fellow commenters was not supportive or reciprocal:

I never really saw the harm because, you know, if a bunch of strangers know that I’m on the spectrum, so what, like what are they going to do about it . . . I didn’t care if anybody judged it. If anything, I was confident that people would like it because everyone else is sharing their life story on there. (February 2020)

Bob (male, 24) reported that he anticipated similar hesitations about where to choose to self-disclose on the Internet:

Because if it’s on Facebook or something I know, kind of my friends, I know who’s gonna see it . . . 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)

Unlike Facebook, YouTube’s option to comment anonymously was attractive, but its sheer number of anonymous readers also heightened concerns about how comments would be received. Overall, participants felt the anonymous option outweighed hesitations of how they might be perceived by others. Similar to Suler’s (2004) findings of the “online disinhibition effect,” participants exhibited the traits of dissociative anonymity and invisibility when

commenting below “Wind Waker HD.” All participants hid their identity by using a profile name to “separate their actions online from their in- person lifestyle and identity” (p. 322). Doing so made the disclosure more comfortable. Though all participants engaged in this invisibility, not all chose to take part in dissociative anonymity (Suler, 2004) and could be discovered through their contact information in their profile.

Relatability builds community

Subscribers saw the Game Grumps co-hosts as their friends due to the large amount of information the co-hosts shared and what subscribers perceived as a genuine effort to talk “directly” to them:

They’ve grown very relaxed and open when talking about such issues . . . even though they are talking to each other, they do a great job making it feel like they’re talking directly to you, and interacting with the audience. It creates a very close dynamic between the subscriber and the youtuber. (Arturo, male, 20, February 2020)

Cody (male, age undisclosed) agreed, noting that though he did not personally know them, he saw the co-hosts as his real friends:

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. (September 2018)

Most participants acknowledged this one-sided relationship, and many agreed it was still effective in building a community and encouraging sharing in the comments to lessen the one-sided effect: “The fact that all of this came from someone I hold very close to my heart, even though I don’t know him personally, really made me comfortable [*sic*] to share my thoughts” (Arturo, male, 20, February 2020). Damien (male, 27) agreed that Avidan and Hanson made it so that “you can interact more” (February 2020), and Tucker

(male, 23) felt moved to do the same: “Danny [Hanson] spoke out about his problems first and I think that’s a[n] ongoing theme for pretty much anybody who shared their story in that comment section” (February 2020).

Participants saw the co-hosts’ mission to be “relatable” as key in building this community and encouraging disclosures in the comments: “There’s like this constant sense of interaction and . . . always interacting with you as a subscriber” (Mateo, male, 20, February 2020). Even though some participants remarked that the co-hosts were older than they were, they found Avidan and Hanson relatable nonetheless:

Since they’re both older than me, they’ve gone through more in life than me, the insight they provide for some of lifes’ [*sic*] issues is very good. Both Dan and Arin have said some things that have made me change the way I think, maybe because I’ve been watching them for so long. (Arturo, male, 20, February 2020)

Max (male, 21) agreed that the co-hosts’ ages were an advantage for their experience and that motivated the subscriber to disclose their comment in the comments section:

Dan and Arin are in their 30’s, which gives me (as a person in their 20’s) hope that I should always try my best . . . knowing that Dan who had, in my mind, “made it” in life, struggled with the same thing was extremely comforting. I felt the need to say at least thank you. (February 2020)

In addition to age, many participants also said Avidan and Hanson’s relatability was more genuine than traditional Hollywood celebrities: “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” (Kari, female, 20, October 2018). Bob and Tucker mirrored this point:

[Hollywood celebrities] just feel very distant . . . 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. (Bob, male, 24, September 2018)

[On] YouTube, anybody can broadcast themselves and that means that more often than not you are going to get very down to earth everyday people who are just trying to make entertaining stuff through their means that are not at all equivalent to Hollywood, or at least most of them aren't. (Tucker, male, 23, February 2020)

Megan (female, 21) noted that while Let's Play hosts like Avidan and Hanson felt more relatable than celebrities, they are still on camera:

There are content creators like Let's Players . . . that post every day . . . they post pictures, they post videos, they post stories in their videos that are personal . . . We don't really know that from a celebrity . . . it's a lot more intimate . . . even if they are talking to the camera. (February 2020)

Participants like Max (male, 21) saw Avidan and Hanson as genuine (on camera or not) because "Dan once said in a video that he sometimes forgets they're making a video because he's just having so much fun with Arin" (February 2020). Max further commented that Avidan and Hanson "have a community built by fans around something as simple as two guys having fun playing video games" (Max, male, 21, February 2020). Arturo (male, 20) agreed that "between the fans there is this proximity that I have yet to experience in any other community" (February 2020). Mateo (male, 20) also mentioned that this is "the kind of community where you know, you can share stuff like that about yourself and people will either be like, 'Oh that's cool to hear, I feel the same way' or just like ignore it," which made commenting about one's mental-health experiences more comfortable (February 2020). Megan (female, 21) closed noting that the Game Grumps community fostered fan goodwill by stating: "I've never personally had an issue with Game Grumps fans" (February 2020).

Beyond their appreciation for Game Grumps' creation of a solid fan base, the participants stayed in the community because of their deep parasocial relationship with Avidan and Hanson. Participants understood that they did not

personally know the co-hosts but that they saw them as real friends (de Bérail et al., 2019) and perceived their intentions to create intimacy as genuine.

Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to understand why and to what end mental-health disclosures occur within YouTube comments of the Let's Play gaming community. It did so by asking what motivates Game Grumps viewers to subscribe to the channel and disclose their mental-health experiences in the comments section. It also asked what the implications are for sharing such experiences in public yet anonymous spaces like YouTube. Findings revealed two key motivations and implications that embody mental-health disclosure experiences: (a) subscribers disclose (by modeling the Game Grumps co-hosts) a variety of mental-health experiences and provide the language to "own" them in a public space, and (b) disclosures make visible some subscribers' coping processes and aim to mobilize others to create their own.

Participants disclosed their mental-health experiences for their own benefit as well as the benefit of others, reading the comments section below the video. Most stated how their disclosure led to a positive experience, with a desire to thank the co-hosts for modeling disclosure in "Wind Waker HD." Disclosing led participants to feel like they were combating another's loneliness by utilizing YouTube's anonymous capabilities to safely share. All participants who commented related to Avidan's and Hanson's own struggles.

The findings corroborated a theoretical understanding of self-disclosure in that the participants' comments (Appendix A) ranged from "emotional and instrumental commentary" to "informational and prescriptive advice" (De Choudhury & De, 2014, p. 79). Additionally, participants unanimously agreed it was easier to disclose once someone they trusted and felt connected to disclosed first, as Avidan and Hanson had (De Choudhury & De, 2014). Though self-disclosure can create the

fear of “discrimination by members of the public” (due to mental-health stigma), “broadcasting one’s experience means educating people about mental illness” (Corrigan & Rao, 2012, p. 466). Most participants hoped their comment would (a) show others they were not alone and (b) show Avidan and Hanson their gratitude for creating a cycle for safe sharing.

In addition to disclosure, the participants used the comments section to narrow the gap between content creator and content consumer. Most participants were candid about knowing that the co-hosts were not speaking to them but that the co-hosts’ intentions to be “relatable” showed a goodwill to create a “conversation” in the comments section. Participants cited this as one of many reasons why they moved from Game Grumps “viewer” to Game Grumps “subscriber” and reap the benefits of being a part of this particular gaming community.

Disclosures, thus, led to the development of a community of peer-to-peer support in the comments section. Our findings support the 2009 study by de Bérail, Gullion, and Bungener and the 2016 study by Naslund, Aschbrenner, and Marsch that there is a connection between parasocial relationships and peer-to-peer online support. This parasocial relationship, which even subscribers mentioned was one with a considerable age gap, served as a gateway for subscribers to build peer-to-peer online support with fans closer to their own age.

This study also sought to understand, as called for by Whiting and Williams (2013), the uses and gratifications of the comments section of “Wind Waker HD.” Subscribers noted the presence of a specific need in the gaming community (mental-health disclosure) beyond what is generally sought from game content such as humorous banter. Our findings corroborate Whiting and Williams’s (2013) uses and gratifications of social media: participants noted that the comments section of “Wind Waker HD,” indeed, served as (a) social interaction (a desire to be in a group with a commonality, such as gaming, to disclose and discuss

information); (b) entertainment (utilizing Let's Plays and other gaming content as an approach to entering conversations about mental health; (c) information seeking and answers/comfort for questions (subscribers utilizing the comments section of the gaming YouTuber's video to further discuss one's own experiences and to help others experiencing the same); and (d) convenience and utility (a way to discuss such information within the gaming community easily).

The study's results shed light on the uses of social media and benefits of self-disclosure as well as the outlets where mental-health disclosures are taking place without stigma. These outlets found in communities with a shared commonality (such as gaming) have the ability to leverage that commonality by an individual with high influence. The use of social media to host these conversations is imperative due to the comfort in dissociative anonymity and invisibility for disclosing mental-health experiences (Suler, 2004).

Traditional mental-health interventions and seeking a mental-health professional came up in some interviews. Participants recognized the benefits of these interventions but reported that due to barriers such as uncertainty and inconvenience many more could benefit from using online social media platforms as a starting point for disclosure and community seeking (De Choudhury & De, 2014). Participants felt that commenting strengthened the gaming community as a social-support group to combat the stigma of mental-health disclosure and, as a byproduct, strengthened the bond subscribers felt toward the channel.

Implications for theory and practice

The study's findings lay bare future research questions surrounding YouTube self-disclosure, public health, and mental illness. It is hoped that the original comments made by participants (Appendix A) and their interview data, which expanded upon their motivations and implications for disclosing, will prompt more parasocial-relationship

research. More specifically, YouTube vlog comments can be used to more deeply apply the online disinhibition effect to video-game vlogging and mental health.

The data may also assist mental- and public-health practitioners in creating similar online environments to afford individuals a space to disclose. As mental-health self-disclosures become more prevalent in YouTube comment sections, researchers and practitioners should support the normalizing of disclosure to eradicate the stigma of mental illnesses as the participants have done.

Limitations

While the participants in this study represented those who have disclosed mental-health experiences in the comments section of a single Game Grumps video, the research does not aim to be generalizable or reflect all subscribers who comment on Let's Plays. Within sampling, we did not reach gender parity (seven male participants, three female). Future studies should explore women's Let's Play experiences relating to mental health. This study also had to decline participation from those younger than 19 but who disclosed about their mental health in the hundreds. Future research should study the disclosure of minors in Let's Play comments. Finally, the study participants came from largely Western countries (United States, Canada, Portugal, Mexico, and Australia). Future research should interview YouTube gaming subscribers from Greater Asia and Africa regarding culture-specific disclosures.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A. Participant YouTube comments

Pseudonym	YouTube Comment
Cody	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.
Bob	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
Kari	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

	<p>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 mind-set 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</p>
Raven	<p>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.</p>
Tucker	<p>I actually have a very similar life story to Danny, but rather than Obsessive Compulsive Disorder it was Aspergers</p>

	<p>Syndrome. I wasn't diagnosed until grade six, and so for a long time I just wouldn't understand a lot of things and it would take me forever to learn a whole bunch of stuff that was normal to everyone else, and I would have no reason as to why, so people would call me stupid and I would believe them. It wasn't until I found out the truth that my life took a turn for the better and I could understand that just because I was a certain way didn't mean I couldn't enjoy myself. Danny, I think I speak for many people when I say you really touched me with your story. It's so nice to hear such a positive message for people who have to go through such unfair and senseless hardships. Thanks for sticking out for us and making us laugh, man!</p>
Mateo	<p>I always get a lot of anxiety about the future whenever I spend too much time thinking about it, it's hard not to obsess over that which you can't directly control, especially when you'd like things to go a certain type of way. Game Grumps helps a lot with that shit, interestingly enough. hearing Danny's story and being reminded that his life was difficult before it got easier tends to ease my mind a bit. helps to relate.</p>
Arturo	<p>Even today, I come back to this very episode when I'm feeling down, just to hear Dan's story, It always makes me feel much better.</p>
Damien	<p>Thanks Dany:) I'm relieved to think that someone as awesome as you felt that way once and could become the fantastic human being you are now. Givves me hopes</p>
Megan	<p>It's really weird how much I relate to Danny. I have clinical depression and I'm on Prozac currently (only been on it for half a year now) and it's helping tremendously, we both</p>

	<p>have Jewish dads whose first language wasn't English (my dad's from Berlin, Germany, so his first language was German), American moms that the dads met when they first came over to the states, crazy curly hair, dig gaming, love to sing, weirdly happy a lot, etc. I know they guys don't read the comments, but on the off chance they somehow do . . . thank you for being here. Thank you Danny for existing and giving me someone to relate to and that I can learn from the experiences of. It's honestly been the biggest help since I started watching you guys. Thanks to my friends Matte and Kenna for getting me into Game Grumps in the first place. Y'all helped me more than ya know. Keep doing you, guys.</p>
Max	<p>Thank you dan avidan;u; you're a really cool guy you really helped me</p>