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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Abstract

Through technological innovation and the rise of digital media platforms, many young adults are afforded the opportunity to spend their lives online. 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 forge an intimate bond between producer and subscriber, allowing each to engage in content 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, it analyzed the meaning making processes of YouTube subscribers surrounding their relationship with GameGrumps who discloses his personal mental health challenges in 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. Doing so uncovered 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 gaming vlogger.

Theoretical Framework

Shared Mental Health Disclosure
- Gaming YouTubers address personal mental health topics indirectly with subscribers through a video camera in their studio.
- The YouTuber is viewed as a friend as opposed to a traditional mental health expert (Westenberg, 2016, p. 9).
- This can elicit positive outcomes of openly discussing one's choices with others in hopes of finding individuals who relate (Corrigan, 2012, p.466).

Mental Health Self-Disclosure in Social Media
- Self-disclosure and social support can improve self-efficacy, defined as one's belief in their ability to reach their goals (De Choudhury and De, 2014, p. 71).
- Studies have surmised that the overall influence YouTube vloggers have on young subscribers is that YouTubers are admired more than Hollywood celebrities because they seem more attainable, relatable, and personal (Westenberg, 2016, p. 8)

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.

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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?

Due to participant response rate, the study was unable to collect data on RQ3.

Methodology

- Data were collected from August 2018 to October 2018. Criteria for participation included YouTube subscribers from the United States or abroad who were at least 19 years of age and had commented on a video, expressing their own mental health experiences, of a gaming YouTuber.
- Subscribers were identified through a YouTube comment search and 26 (who made available their contact information on their own channel) were recruited. Four GameGrumps subscribers, assigned code names S1 through S4, were interviewed via Skype, phone, and email (when needed).
- In-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed into word documents by the researcher using Express Scribe. Transcripts were then coded using a grounded theory approach to surface commonalities, unique experiences, and perspectives on the interview questions. Concepts were then analyzed into themes using the theoretical framework.

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.
Show less

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Findings & Analysis

Subscribers voluntarily chose to disclose their mental health story on GameGrumps' comment section of one where he disclosed personal information about himself.

Participants disclosed their own mental health experiences including depression, anxiety, suicide, and obsessive-compulsive disorder in the comments section to show support for others also experiencing mental health problems who choose to not disclose on YouTube. Their aim was to create a **positive experience** for both themselves and the individual who sees the comment.

Theme 1: Positive Experience and Letting Go
"At first, I was a little bit nervous [but later thought] I had done something with my desires to tell Dan and Arin that, 'Hey, you guys did something good for me'" (S2, SEPTEMBER, 2018).

Theme 2: Not Being Alone
"[After] hearing his (GameGrumps') experience, I felt like it's okay to come forward with this kind of things" (S4, OCTOBER, 2018).

Theme 3: Anonymity
"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" (S3, OCTOBER, 2018).

Theme 4: Relatability and Comfort
"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" (S1, SEPTEMBER, 2018).

Subscribers described disclosing in the comments sections as easier due to the **anonymity** YouTube provides. Subscribers disclosed because it **made them feel as if they were not alone.** Much of this encouragement came from GameGrumps discussing his own mental health experiences, who subscribers saw as **close to them like a friend.**

Conclusion

- **This study aimed to understand why and how mental health disclosure occurs within the YouTube gaming community and what outcomes subscribers experience doing so.**
- Findings show those who chose to disclose their mental health story did so for their own benefit as well as for the benefit of those reading.
  - Most subscribers stated how their choice of disclosure led to self-guidance, self-awareness, and relief that they were not the only ones experiencing difficulties in their lives.
- Results also show the significance to subscribers when a public figure, like GameGrumps, shares their own mental health experiences online.
  - Subscribers found comfort in watching, commenting, and relating their own experiences with GameGrumps'.
- Though self-disclosure creates the fear of "discrimination by members of the public," research indicates that while the stigma toward mental health exists, "broadcasting one's experience means educating people about mental illness" (Corrigan, 2012, p. 466).
- While anonymity was a factor for most participants, it did not overpower the importance they believed in sharing their voice, even if it meant only one or two people would read it.

Positive experience and letting go

Relatability and comfort

Social Media Self-Disclosure

Not alone

Anonymity

Future Directions

- These findings serve as future research questions surrounding self-disclosure and mental/physical illness as mediated on YouTube.
- As mental health disclosure becomes more prevalent online, self-disclosure may become normalized, aiding in the mainstream usage of YouTube for this purpose and, perhaps, diminishing the stigma of mental illness.

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