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

Maria Mickles
University Honors Program
School of Communication, College of Communication, Fine Arts & Media

Abstract

Through technological innovation and the rise of digital platforms, specifically YouTube, 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 locations, but forge an intimate bond between producer and consumer, 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 YouTube channel with over one million subscribers, GameGrumps. Specifically, it analyzed the meaning-making processes of YouTube subscribers surrounding their relationship with GameGrumps who discloses 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 YouTube channel and how this may influence 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).

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 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 Ann 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 thing (S4, OCTOBER, 2018).

Theme 3: Anonymity
- ‘I’ve never really talked about my depression on social media… but it’s hard when you know your 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
- 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).

Future Directions

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

References

- De Choudhury, M., & De, S. (2014). Mental Health Discourse on Reddit: Self-disclosure and how this may implicate the online relationship between 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. Observing subscriber interactions in the comments section of one from GameGrumps’ channel, the study found subscribers were identified through a YouTube comment search and 26 (who made at least one comment) were recruited. Four GameGrumps subscribers, assigned code names S1 through S4, were interviewed via Skype, phone, and email (when needed).
- RQ1: What are the outcomes of gaming YouTubers who discuss topics such as depression, mental/physical health, and suicide with their subscribers either during play or as a video on their gaming channel?
- RQ2: Why do subscribers feel open to discuss their personal problems to those 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.