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

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

Abstract

Throughout technological innovation and the rise of digital platforms, specifically YouTube, part of their daily lives (Westerlund, 2016, p.8). YouTube allows content creators to produce videos that not only attract audiences of different ages and geographical locations, but forge an intimate bond between producer and subscriber, allowing each to engage in content through the comments section (Westerlund, 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 (Westerlund, 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 suggested 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 (Westerlund, 2016, p.8).

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 comments in the GameGrumps comments section) were recruited. Four GameGrumps subscribers, assigned code names S1 through S4, were interviewed via 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.

Findings & Analysis

Subscribers voluntarily chose to disclose their mental health story on GameGrumps’ comments 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

All at first, I was a little bit nervous but later thought about it and my every time I watch this episode. Not because I hear it from you. Because… it’s healthy to let go. To not feel as if you’re trying to deal with it. To accept what I chose. (S1, 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 your grandparents will see it. 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).

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, adding to the mainstream usage of YouTube for this purpose and, perhaps, diminishing the stigma of mental illness.

References