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Mental Health Atmospheres Video Games

New Directions
in Game Research II



[transcript] Studies of Digital Media Culture

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Mental Health | Atmospheres | Video Games

Mental Health of Twitch Streamers During COVID-19

KELLI DUNLAP

Twitch is a live video streaming platform originally developed for streaming gameplay content. However, today's streamers (e.g., individuals who broadcast via Twitch) use the platform to share a variety of content, from talk shows to cooking demonstrations, and foster social communities online. Twitch usage has skyrocketed since the beginning of COVID-19 quarantine and streamers have been bearing the emotional brunt of lockdown stress and anxiety. Caring for their own mental health while simultaneously managing and supporting their own streaming community's well-being, Twitch streamers often find themselves in the position of mental health first responders. Using Twitch, the largest online streaming platform, as a way to find social and emotional support and connection online, however, is nothing new. A sense of community and belongingness is a core motivation for Twitch viewers prior to the pandemic. In fact, enjoying the streamer and the surrounding community plays a larger role in stream viewership than even the content being streamed.¹

Whether a streamer intends to address mental health issues on their stream or not, viewers use stream chats and communities to get emotional, social, and psychological needs met. Streamers are frequently a touchpoint for persons managing a mental health issue, from feeling disconnected or lonely to struggling with symptoms of mental illness. However, there is a fine line between providing mental health education and support versus offering opinion, treatment, or direct

1 de Wit, Jan/van der Kraan, Alicia/Theeuwes, Joep: "Live Streams on Twitch Help Viewers Cope With Difficult Periods in Life", In: *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. (2020) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.586975>.

intervention. The former are within the purview of mental health advocates while the latter are, at best, murky ethical waters. The rallying cry of “I’m not your therapist” is a well-known issue within the streaming community, as evidenced by multiple panels and discussions on the topic (e.g. TwitchCon 2016, 2017, 2018; PAX Online 2020).

In order to have a better understanding of why, even before COVID, Twitch streaming communities frequently served as places for peer mental health support and even crisis intervention, it is important to examine the current state of mental health in the United States.

MENTAL HEALTH IN THE U.S.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 7.7 million (16%) American children and 47 million (19%) American adults met diagnostic criteria for at least one mental illness.^{2,3} Despite the high prevalence of mental illness in the U.S. population, the majority of those experiencing mental illness do not receive professional mental health support.⁴ On average, only 43% of those who meet criteria for a psychological disorder obtain treatment.⁵ A general shortage of mental health professionals and systemic obstacles like cost of treatment, insurance coverage, geographic location, and perceived stigma of help-seeking create significant barriers to treatment even in the best of times.⁶

Between January 2020 and September 2020, the height of COVID-19 in the U.S., the number of people seeking help for anxiety rose 634% and the number

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- 2 Whitney, Daniel/Peterson, Mark: “US National and State-Level Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders and Disparities of Mental Health Care Use in Children.” in *JAMA Pediatrics*, 173(4), 389-391. (2019), <https://doi.org/oi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.5399>
 - 3 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. “Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. ” (2019) <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/>
 - 4 National Alliance on Mental Illness. “Mental illness by the numbers.” (2019) see <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>
 - 5 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/>
 - 6 Andrade, Laura, Helena et al: “Barriers to mental health treatment: results from the WHO World Mental Health surveys [Article].” in *Psychological Medicine*, 44(6), 1303-1317. (2014) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291713001943>

seeking support for depression rose 873%.⁷ Despite the pandemic forcing mental health providers to shift from primarily in-person to nearly 100% telemedicine, thus reducing geographical and proximity barriers to treatment, the lack of providers and the cost of care have remained major obstacles.⁸

Given these significant systemic barriers to treatment and the predictable yet still alarming spike in requests for mental health services during the pandemic, it is not a surprise that people seek out and find non-traditional resources, like streamers and streaming communities, for mental health support.⁹

STREAMER MENTAL HEALTH

The amount of academic research on streaming has dramatically increased in the last few years, with over 70 articles being published in the past nine months alone.¹⁰ Research on streamers themselves, however, is extremely limited, especially when compared to other streaming-specific topics like marketing or viewer engagement.¹¹

Scholarly work that has specifically addressed streamer mental health has done so through the lens of affective (emotional) labor involved in live streaming, the challenges of being a streamer with a mental illness, and the impact of

7 Mental Health America: “COVID 19 and Mental Health: A Growing Crisis.” (2021) See <https://mhanational.org/research-reports/covid-19-and-mental-health-growing-crisis>

8 One of the most significant barriers to treatment is accessibility. 77% of counties in the United States have a shortage of mental health providers. Rural areas are particularly underserved as 65% of non-metropolitan counties do not have a single psychiatrist and 47% do not have a licensed psychologist (America’s Mental Health Rankings, 2020).

9 Panchal, Nirmita et al. “The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use | KFF. Kaiser Family Foundation.” (2021) see <https://www.kff.org/health-reform/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>

10 Seering, Joseph: “Twitch Bibliography.” (2021a) Twitter.

11 Seering, Joseph: “Twitch Bibliography.” (2021b) Google Sheets.

microcelebrity and influencers discussing their own mental health on streams.^{12, 13, 14, 15, 16} Outside of academia, the stressors and mental health impact of streaming on streamers has been documented by games journalism as well as streamers themselves, with issues like burnout, parasocial relationships, community toxicity, harassment, and abuse being common topics.

In order to better understand streamer mental health generally as well as the impact of COVID-19 on streamers and their communities, this author along with co-researchers Marie Shanley and Jocelyn Wagner conducted an ethnographic study focused on the mental health of streamers during the pandemic (for the full report, see Dunlap et al., 2022).¹⁷

Study overview

For this study, participants were recruited via social media posts and were required to have been actively streaming for at least one year to be considered for inclusion. Of the 62 streamers who responded, 19 met inclusion criteria and were able to complete a semi-structured interview with the research team between September 18 and October 15, 2020. Each interview was recorded via Zoom and transcribed using an automated transcription service. The transcript was reviewed for accuracy and the audio recording deleted once confirmed to ensure anonymity. A

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- 12 Ruberg, Bonnie/Cullen, Amanda: “Feeling for an audience: The gendered emotional labor of video game live streaming.” in *Digital Culture and Society*, 5(2), (2020) pp 133-148.
 - 13 Taylor, T. L.: *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (1st ed.). (2018) Princeton University Press.
 - 14 Woodcock, Jamie/Johnson, Mark R: “The Affective Labor and Performance of Live Streaming on Twitch.tv.” in *Television & New Media*, 20(8), 813-823. (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419851077>.
 - 15 Johnson, Mark R.: “Inclusion and exclusion in the digital economy: disability and mental health as a live streamer on Twitch.tv.” in *Information Communication and Society*, 22(4), 506-520. (2019) <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1476575>.
 - 16 LaMastra, Nina et al.: “How a Live Streamer’s Choice in Played Game Affects Mental Health Conversations.” in *CHI Play ’20*. (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1145/3383668.3419894>.
 - 17 Dunlap, Kelli/Shanley, Maria/Wagner, Jocelyn: “Mental Health Live: An Ethnographic Study on the Mental Health of Twitch Streamers During COVID.” In A. Brewer, Johanna; Bonnie Ruberg; Christopher J. Persaud; Cullen (Ed.), *Live Streaming Culture*. (2022) MIT Press.

qualitative methodology was used to systematically approach and gain insight into the rich and complex life experiences of streamers. Each transcript was thoroughly read and reviewed for topics, themes, ideas, and patterns of meaning related to streamer mental wellness. Relevant text segments from each transcription were identified and given a code which generally described the feeling or idea expressed by the text. Codes were analyzed and used to generate broader themes.

The study identified four major themes derived from the narrative analysis of interviews: 1) streamers serve as frontline mental health responders; 2) streamers struggle to find balance between their own mental well-being and the needs of their communities; 3) streamers are unsupported and unprepared to address mental health; 4) streamers and their communities are resilient.

STREAMERS SERVE AS FRONTLINE MENTAL HEALTH RESPONDERS

The phrase “I’m not your therapist” is a common one throughout the streamer community. However, streamers frequently find themselves in situations where they feel pressure to provide psychological, social, or emotional support. Over the course of the pandemic, streamers observed a rise in engagement in both their Twitch chats as well as their private Discord channels regarding “real-life” content, such as financial hardship or stress, being openly discussed in their communities. Some streamers reported a strong sense of personal responsibility for the health and well-being of people in their communities and they themselves could not share or show their own struggles as it would “bring down” the mood of the stream. For example:

- There’s definitely been a shift more toward people talking a lot more about stuff that’s stressing them out, and things [people] are going through things that are kind of weighing down on them. – K4
- You’ve had those couple of community members and maybe you had to give a little extra TLC too,¹⁸ but now it’s all your community members need that little extra TLC. – M4
- There’s so many things that are going on and it’s really just been a tough time trying to connect with your community because your community has always seen you as a superhero. – M2

18 American slang for “tender loving care.”

- You're leading a community, you're leading people, and so you have this responsibility to help them to be around for them. – J3

Streamers reported a noticeable increase in the frequency and intensity of mental health topics in their streams compared to pre-COVID times. It is important to highlight that the increase in frequency and intensity of interactions reported by streamers closely parallels the experience of mental health professionals during COVID. Like therapists, streamers are navigating what it means to provide a space for expressing and processing of emotions and provide support for others while they themselves are experiencing the same trauma in real time.¹⁹ Comments made by streamers about their struggles managing mental health issues in stream are nearly indistinguishable from comments made by mental health professionals citing their own experience caring for clients during the pandemic.²⁰

STREAMERS STRUGGLE TO FIND BALANCE BETWEEN THEIR OWN MENTAL WELL-BEING AND THE NEEDS OF THEIR COMMUNITIES

Most of the streamers interviewed commented on the need to find balance between their own mental wellness and the wellness of their community. Several streamers stated they had taken time off from streaming or adjusted their schedules to be less intense in terms of streaming frequency and/or duration. In general, streamers expressed an understanding that they need to be able to care for themselves in order to care for the community, but that this is a challenging line to walk.

- That has been the biggest struggle of it all, just trying to balance how COVID is affecting me, but also being there for my community and having boundaries, but knowing that in some cases, I need to go the extra mile. But keeping in check that I don't go too far. – K3

19 Madani, Doha: Therapists are under strain in COVID-19 era, counseling clients on trauma they're also experiencing themselves. in NBC News. (2020) <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/therapists-are-under-strain-covid-era-counseling-clients-trauma-they-n1230956>.

20 Dunlap, Kelli/Shanley, Marie/Wagner, Jocelyn: Reserach Report: Mental Health of Streamers During COVID-19. *PAX Online*. (2021) see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DE4P1wqCyV4&ab_channel=Mxiety.

- I need the same support, and in some ways I need maybe even a little bit extra attention because I'm trying to help a community and myself, and going through all those things this year at the same time. – J3
- Oh God, it feels like there's a lot of pressure to not be a human being and just be an entertainer, I feel like any time I have any sort of an emotional reaction on the stream, I'm just supposed to hide it because all my viewers need a distraction and I'm supposed to be that distraction, and it's very difficult to just ignore that and try and push those feelings to the side and remind myself constantly that I'm just there to entertain people.
– M1

A secondary component of balance was found in regards to ethical boundaries. Many streamers voiced concern about potentially “blurring the lines” between being supportive and “therapizing”; others struggled to balance a perceived duty to provide and fact-check COVID-related information against continuing brand expectations for simple entertainment or “a chill space.”

- It is an added level of stress to the streamer because we need to be on top of it and make sure that we are utilizing every possible advantage that we have as content creators to push for that level of awareness, while also ensuring that we are being true to ourselves and engaging in the kind of content that is going to result in the success of our streams in our communities. So it's a balancing act unlike anything I've ever had before. – K6
- Trying to be sensitive to people who wanna talk about COVID and people who don't wanna talk about COVID... It's a hard balance of trying to meet everybody's needs. – J2
- Yes, I definitely think that a lot of us are dancing the line between therapist and a shoulder to lean on. I don't think it's a bad thing that we're there for people, but I also think that given so many of us are untrained to deal with such serious situations, it may possibly lead to some doing more harm than good without wanting to or realizing that they are. – M1

STREAMERS ARE UNSUPPORTED AND UNPREPARED TO ADDRESS MENTAL HEALTH

Streamers expressed feeling ill-equipped to handle the increased frequency and intensity of mental health topics and concerns occurring in their streams, chats, and communities. Even streamers whose content focused on mental health and identified as mental health advocates described feeling a sense of unease and self-doubt, and expressed a strong desire for guidance.

- I try my best to help, but at the end of the day, I do remind them that I'm not a professional, so I do lend out those resources the best I can. – M6
- It keeps me up at night, because I'm not a professional, I am constantly paranoid about putting somebody in danger just because I don't know... I'm just so scared of just doing the wrong thing because I know that this is such a delicate subject and it shouldn't be handled so lightly. – K3
- I personally wish I was more well-equipped, as well as my mods. I felt bad asking for one of my mods to check in on [the well-being of a community member] when one, I'm not equipped to handle that situation, he's not equipped, my mod isn't equipped to handle that sort of situation, and... It's just one of those things where you prepare for... But when you're there, it's just like, shit hits the fan, what do we do? How do we handle this? – J6

In some cases, streamers expressed frustration and resentment at finding themselves in scenarios they did not “sign up” for nor have the training to manage.

- I'm not a mental health professional, it's not my responsibility to fix other people's mental health, and coming into my chat and bringing down the mood that I have worked so diligently hard to maintain and to bring up is real frustrating because why would you dump all of that shit on all of these people, but at the same time, I would rather them say something than to say nothing and feel alone, the last thing I wanted someone to feel alone. – K6
- Yeah we can talk about [mental health], but when people constantly come to you while you're streaming, like you're just trying to have a release and they're just trying to put all their problems to weigh it on to you, it's difficult because now you're seen as their therapist. – M2
- We're experiencing more and more instances like that where someone comes around and the vibe is just shot because once again, someone's

having a bad day, and of course, you wanna be there for that person, but it's just happening more often than normal, and we find ourselves holding more and more space than usual. – J5

STREAMERS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES ARE RESILIENT

During the coding process, one of the most unexpected but most common codes was “positives”-statements reflecting personal growth or being able to “see the brightside.” Nearly every streamer commented or shared a story about how the pandemic has brought their communities closer together or how the constraints of lockdown have led to creative solutions for connecting and supporting one another.

- I know that a lot of us didn't sign up for a leadership position, or I hear a lot of people say, “I'm not a therapist, I didn't start streaming to be somebody's therapist,” but there's the reality of, you're dealing with people. A lot of people use you as a tool to help them deal with whatever they're going through, just by watching, and... You don't have to be a therapist to be, to have empathy. You don't have to be any type of mental health professional to just bring some type of comfort or reminder to somebody that they're not alone. – K3
- We put a memorial service together for her, for everyone to come into Discord, say a few nice words. We literally held it in ANIMAL CROSSING, we were just running around on ANIMAL CROSSING on an island, having a memorial service because I think that closure is really important and grieving and all that, and with COVID and stuff like we can't go to funerals and it's not like we were all close enough with her family that we felt like... it would have felt intrusive to ask for an invite to the Zoom funeral and stuff like that, so we just did our own thing. – J5
- It has bonded our community in an unexpected way. – K6
- And just sort of togetherness that I think existed before COVID, but now because we're all, most of us are fairly separated, for me, from the people who we would see in our everyday lives, it's like the people who we have via these communities are filling that void. – M3
- I think we've all been learning just not to take each other for granted and to be a little bit kinder to one another, 'cause we're all just dealing with the unimaginable. – J5

IMPROVING CONDITIONS FOR STREAMER MENTAL HEALTH

A second aim of the study, beyond extracting the major themes of subject responses, was to identify ways of improving or supporting streamer well-being. The main takeaways from the interviews focused on three main strategies: improve access and awareness of available resources, provide alternatives to hotlines and links, and deliver more psychoeducation, training, and professional support.

Improve access and awareness of available resources

One of the major obstacles in streamers accessing and sharing resources was a perceived lack of those resources. The majority of streamers interviewed reported that they curated their own set of links, websites, and hotlines to share with their community. In other words, streamers felt compelled to put in the leg-work to create and recreate lists of resources because they were not aware that such lists already exist. Per J3's experience, "I think every single streamer that I know of is just figuring it out as they go." Many of the resources requested by streamers, from mental health tip sheets to therapist directories, already exist but not in a space where streamers know to look. For example, Twitch Cares (Streamer Square, 2020) is a collection of mental health resources hosted on Twitch that was developed in collaboration with Take This, a mental health non-profit specifically focused on the mental health of game players and game developers. It provides dozens of links to mental health information and resources, but is largely unknown to streamers. When suggested as a resource, many streamers were surprised but also frustrated; as M1 stated "I had no idea that the TwitchCare page existed, I kind of wish that maybe that was more visible."

These experiences highlight the major gap between existing resources and information and those that need them. This gap could—and should – be addressed through collaboration between Twitch and mental health organizations. Furthermore, given the massive reach of platforms like Twitch and the unique stressors faced by streamers, it is in the interest of mental health organizations to actively engage with this community and create support tools and resources that are specific to the needs of the streaming community.

Provide alternatives to hotlines and links

As participant K3 eloquently summarized, "Everybody's kind of tired of just being sent to a website or to a phone line." Streamers wanted to know that their viewers and community members were being taken care of and expressed a strong

desire for personal and warm hand-offs when connecting others to services. When in crisis, referral to an emergency hotline is the best course of action. Most streamers do not have any kind of mental health crisis training, and even if they did, the very public nature of Twitch makes it an inappropriate venue for managing a mental health crisis. Though managing a crisis is the most obvious and frightening scenario, the majority of incidents streamers reported involved viewers who were in need of supportive, more long-term services, and for whom a crisis hotline was not appropriate.

As discussed previously, navigating the mental health system in the U.S. and connecting with a mental health provider is no small task. And while the state of the mental healthcare system is beyond the purview of any one streamer or platform, there's still opportunities for improvement. For example, Twitch could provide a link to the Twitch Cares page when a streamer makes Affiliate or Partner status or coordinate with peer-support organizations at state or local levels to provide a comprehensive list of peer support resources or free or reduced-cost mental health services.²¹

Deliver more psychoeducation, training, and professional support

Streamers are hungry for mental health streaming education and support. Suggestions from streamers included a desire for training on managing streamer-specific challenges, such as coping with harassment or managing trauma dumping on-stream. The goal of these resources would be to improve the streamer's confidence in their own ability to appropriately and effectively manage the most common issues that occur during a stream that negatively impact their mental well-being. Streamers also shared a desire to connect with streaming-proficient mental health professionals or advocates in order to check in and get advice on specific strategies for responsibly discussing mental health content or managing mental health issues that occur during a stream.

21 Streamer Square: Behind the Streams: Mental Health with Mxiety and Dr. Kelli Dunlap. (2020) see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yr6aRmC8AXA>.

CONCLUSION

Live-streaming has served as a medium for discussing mental health issues for over two decades. These conversations can occur organically as part of a normal conversation between streamer and audience member, or, in some instances, streamers intentionally create space for the discussion of mental health content. Since the pandemic, streamers have reported more mental health-related discussions in their streams, especially in-chat sharing of significant “real life” challenges including financial, social, and emotional stressors.

Twitch streamers report experiencing a wide range of stressors that are occurring more often and more intensely compared to pre-COVID times. These stressors include financial instability, loss of income or career opportunities, loss of community members (i.e. burnout, death, etc.), feeling increased pressure to provide social and emotional resources, more emotionally-challenging or draining interactions with and within their communities, and a sense of needing to be a constant source of positivity, support, and information even at the expense of their own well-being. In other words, streamers report frequently finding themselves in situations that strongly parallel the experiences of mental health first responders; providing people in crisis with emergency resources, holding space for emotionally heavy topics, and delivering social support to entire communities. Unfortunately, these additional external demands leave many streamers feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and unprepared. Streamers frequently reported feeling isolated in their role as community leader; to be someone their community relies on and always “shows up” for their members, but struggling simultaneously with the lack of support for themselves.

There is an urgent need for addressing the serious and significant disconnect between existing mental health resources and the accessibility of those resources to live streamers. Improved education, communication, and support around mental health and mental illness, whether that be via outreach campaigns from mental health organizations or through Twitch directly, is a critical missing component in streamers managing their own mental wellness.

One of the most striking and consistent findings from the interviews was the amount of work streamers dedicated to finding and distributing mental health resources. Every single streamer interviewed shared that they had spent time researching and compiling resources to the best of their abilities in order to support the mental health needs of their community. As most streamers are not mental health professionals or advocates, this represents a significant amount of individual labor into researching and sharing information while simultaneously serving as the front-facing social support for an entire community of people. Their efforts

are significant as are their impacts, but streamers should not have to do this work alone. Collaboration between streaming platforms and mental health organizations is crucial to lightening streamers' emotional and mental load and improving their overall quality of (streaming) life.

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