Using Uses and Gratifications Theory
to Create a Successful Twitch Channel

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Abstract

Twitch.tv has steadily gained popularity since its debut on the social media scene in 2011. Bringing a new live element to typical content creation, Twitch fosters a dynamic relationship between content creators, known as streamers, and their audience of viewers. This unique relationship allows direct, real-time communication between content creators and viewers, allowing viewers to directly influence the content that is broadcast.

Uses and gratifications theory states that users will seek the most efficient tool to gratify their needs. Once a content creator defines the primary motives of Twitch users, they can adjust their content to gratify the audience's needs. By viewing Twitch through the lens of uses and gratifications theory, one can construct a Twitch channel that will quickly achieve success. In this case, I have created Zero Lives Gaming, a twitch channel that can be found at twitch.tv/zero_lives_gaming

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Project Link

My Twitch channel can be found at:

Twitch.tv/Zero_Lives_Gaming

Research Questions

The research questions that drove this project consisted of the following:

- What are the primary motivations for users to view a Twitch channel?

- What motivates a streamer to create a Twitch Channel?

- What are the characteristics of a successful Twitch channel?

- How can a streamer utilize Uses and Gratifications theory to accelerate the growth of their Twitch channel?

Literature Review

What is Twitch?

In the simplest of terms, Twitch.tv is a live streaming social media website that is comprised of two main social groups: streamers and viewers. Streamers are content creators that stream live footage of a variety of content, the most prevalent of which feature the streamer playing a video game. Over the last few years, however, Twitch has seen an increase in "IRL" (In Real Life) and "Just Chatting" streams which feature streamers solely interacting with their chat while on camera. "IRL" and "Just Chatting" streams typically account for the single largest type of stream, attracting 12.4%—approximately 370,000 viewers—of all of the total viewers using Twitch (Twitch Statistics & Charts, 2021).

Twitch's Economic Impact

Twitch has been steadily gaining popularity since its introduction in 2011, exhibiting the largest spike in growth in April 2020 (Twitch Statistics & Charts, 2021). While this is almost certainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the growth is undeniable. Where there is an increase in Twitch users, both viewers and streamers, there is an increase in interest in video games. Twitch has created a new format of video game reviews where viewers can see raw gameplay of newly released games.

Twitch uses a subscriber system that allows viewers to pay $5 to "subscribe" to a streamer. Subscriptions eliminate advertisements from the subscribed streamer's content while allowing access to exclusive emoticons to be used in the chat. Additionally, if a streamer's channel has a large enough audience, they have the option to enable "subscribers-only" chat, which is only accessible to subscribers. This is a double-edged sword, as it acts as an incentive for viewers to subscribe to the channel in order to directly interact with the streamer but excludes viewers who are not subscribed to the channel.

[A]s streams scale up, information overload renders chat unreadable, and moderation becomes overwhelming. Some large streams continue to grow. However, participants become frustrated with the difficulty of interacting in these streams. We found that for this reason, many choose to participate in smaller streams, which they experience as affording more meaningful interaction. (Hamilton, W. A., Garretson, O., & Kerne, A., 2014)

Streamers often get to know consistent viewers on a semi-personal level—addressing them by name when they enter the stream and communicating with them on a personal level. Streamers tend to be more laid back and personal than on competing platforms such as YouTube and Patreon. The lengthy nature of streams might be a contributing factor, as putting on a "false personality" for hours on end during a live stream is impractical. It is in this sense that streamers often take on a role of community leadership if they have a large enough audience. The opinions that streamers share with their audiences have more weight in the gaming community, and can even boost sales of new releases.

Participatory Culture

The motives for Twitch users vary. Viewers are attracted to certain streamers based on the community surrounding them, the personality of the streamer themselves, or simply the content that the streamer shares. The most loyal, consistent viewers tend to be attracted to the personality of the streamer or the community surrounding a particular channel rather than the specific content the streamer shares. This shifts the power from the content shared on a channel to the streamer themselves, which can drastically increase the popularity of a certain video based on who is playing it.

"[L]ive streaming has been essential to the wide success of a number of 'independent' or 'indie' games, which have reached a far greater market than would previously have been the case through their broadcast by high-profile live streamers" (Johnson & Woodcock,

2019). A prime example is *Among Us*, a game that was released in 2018 from an independent developer that found unexpected success two years later on Twitch. Similar surges in popularity of older games are fairly common on Twitch. For example, *Twitch Plays Pokemon* was a social experiment created by an anonymous broadcaster in February 2014 featuring *Pokemon Red* (originally released in 1998).

> In this experiment, called "Twitch Plays Pokemon" (TPP), he wrote a program that parses text from a chat room and uses that as input into an emulator running a copy of Pokemon Red. In this experiment, all viewers (who were also players) shared control of a single avatar. . . . For the first time, players were required to share control of a character, while at the same time, unable to communicate with each other. (Margel, 2014)

The game was ultimately completed in 17 days whilst being controlled entirely by viewers. *Twitch Plays Pokemon* demonstrated that Twitch.tv, as a platform, opened new possibilities for gaming. Twitch is able to breathe new life into older video games, increase exposure to "hidden gems," serve as a social media platform that contains user-created communities, and acts as a source of entertainment for a wide variety of interests.

Twitch Plays Pokemon is just one example of the overwhelming success of Twitch as a model of participatory culture. As Clement Chau states,

> the participatory culture framework is defined by five characteristics:
>
> 1. Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
> 2. Strong support for creating and sharing one's projects
> 3. Informal mentorship
> 4. A belief that contributions matter
> 5. A sense of social connection (Chau, 2010)

As Twitch is a free platform, anyone can participate in stream chats or even become a creator. The loyalty and sense of community that is built on streamers' channels are evidence

of support for both the creator and community. Viewers have the opportunity to become chat moderators to control the chat with the ability to ban users for violating the channel's rules, such as using inappropriate language, harassing the streamer or other members of the community via the chat, etc. Moderators become more vital to the channel as it grows, giving a sense of duty to moderators that comes with a sense of accomplishment as the channel grows. *Twitch Plays Pokemon* is an extreme example of contributions by the chat making a real difference in the content that is created, however many streamers rely on the advice and wisdom of the chat at times when they are stuck in a game. The ability for the audience to interact with the content creator in real-time is arguably Twitch's most valuable feature. Rather than viewers being just that, *viewers,* they become part of the channel based on their willingness to interact.

What Determines the Success of a Twitch Channel?

In order to answer this question, we must analyze the motives of Twitch users through the lens of uses and gratifications theory. "The basic premise of uses and gratifications theory is that individuals seek out media that fulfill their needs and leads to ultimate gratification" (Whiting, 2013). While every individual's personal motivations differ, there are several common goals that users seek. "Stream communities form around a shared identity drawn from the stream's content and the shared experiences of its participants." Ultimately, "[t] he primary activity stream participants engage in is *sociability*, defined by George Simmel as a playful experience of social association characterized by the "sheer pleasure of being together" (Hamilton, W. A., Garretson, O., & Kerne, A., 2014). It is no secret that a positive, welcoming, lively community is the hallmark of a successful stream, but how does one build a channel to that point?

Research Methodology

Analyzing Existing Twitch Channels

In order to create a successful Twitch channel, one must first analyze existing successful channels. Since the motives of Twitch users have grown alongside the platform, it is no longer enough to simply be a place where people gather to voyeuristically watch gameplay. Twitch has evolved into a community where there is an exchange between the streamer and the audience. The streamer provides gameplay and commentary while the viewers provide real-time feedback via the chat.

There are as many ways to quantify the success of a Twitch channel as there are motives for twitch users. Motivations for creating a Twitch channel are numerous. Here are a few examples:

- the formation of a community who share your interests (i.e., gaming)
- the ability to "show off" your gaming prowess
- sponsorship opportunities which may involve receiving free merchandise
- monetary gain

The most straightforward of these is monetary gain. Since there is a direct correlation between viewership and profit, it stands to reason that a large, consistent viewership will result in greater financial gain for the streamer. If, however, monetary gain is not the primary goal of the streamer, but rather, building a large community based on common interests is the measure of success, the result remains the same. Regardless of the specific motivation for creating a Twitch channel, achieving one of these goals will almost always, inadvertently, result of the achievement of all of these goals:

Viewership → Community → Sponsorship opportunity → Financial success

Methods

With these goals in mind, I have observed five different categories of streamers on a regular basis:

- one with a large audience (>10,000 average viewers)
- three with mid-sized audiences (1,000–5,000 average viewers)
- one with a small audience. (<100 average viewers)

I, then, reviewed the level of gratification afforded to the viewer based on the following criteria:

- the streamer's personality and energy level
- high level gameplay
- game reviews and impressions
- streamer's engagement with audience via chat

I have used this qualitative data gathered to determine the most successful combination of these elements that yield the largest number of viewers on a consistent basis. This data has influenced the development of my Twitch channel as well as which of these criteria I focus on.

Research Findings

Five streamers with different-sized audiences were observed. The following tables have been constructed from the data collected over multiple streams based on the primary uses and gratifications that draw viewers to Twitch.

Streamer Engagement with Viewers

One of the primary motivations for Twitch users to become a loyal viewer of a specific channel is the community that is led by the streamer themselves. Twitch is unique in that it functions as a real-time movie theater where the actor (streamer) can directly interact with the audience. This streamer-viewer relationship gives viewers the power to influence the content they are watching, much like *Twitch Plays Pokemon*. The ability for viewers to communicate directly with the streamer in addition to other viewers, awards viewers with a sense of instant gratification.

Table 1.

Streamer	Chat Engagement			
	None (0)	Seldom (1)	Often (2)	Constant (3)
NeffNaps (>100 viewers)				3
DizzyKitten (1,000–5,000 viewers)				3
MeggiPlays (1,000–5,000 viewers)				3
RubberRoss (1,000–5,000 viewers)			2	
TimtheTatMan (>10,000 viewers)			2	

Table 1 shows that smaller streamers tend to interact more with their audience. This could be due to a variety of factors. One possibility is that smaller streamers are consciously

focusing on building a rapport with their viewers to build a community. Another possibility is that these streamers stream more IRL, "Just Chatting," content rather than larger streamers who stream popular video games. As see in Table 2, higher level gameplay is seen in larger streamers. The ability to split one's attention between skillful gameplay and interaction with the chat is difficult, which may lead to less chat engagement with higher level gameplay. Streamers who lack the gaming prowess of competitive and pro level gamers may not draw viewers based on their gaming skills, so they tend to focus on communication with their chat.

Table 2.

Streamer	Gameplay			
	Novice (0)	Casual (1)	Competitive (2)	Pro (4)
NeffNaps (>100 viewers)	0			
DizzyKitten (1,000–5,000 viewers)		1		
MeggiPlays (1,000–5,000 viewers)		1		
RubberRoss (1,000–5,000 viewers)			2	
TimtheTatMan (>10,000 Viewers)				4

Streamer's Personality

Viewers come for the gameplay and stay for the personality of the streamer. Viewers are drawn to humor, whether it be sarcasm, slap-stick, deadpan, etc., these are major draws to successful streamers. Another characteristic that entices viewers is knowledge about gaming. In some cases, particularly horror games, the absence of knowledge can be entertaining as well. Entertainment comes in many forms, most common among these are humorous and informational content delivered by the streamer.

     Streamers benefit from having a basic understanding of a game that can be communicated to viewers. Some content creators, notably RubberRoss as shown in Table 3,

offer insight into game development and a real-time critique of the game. Typical reviewers have time to organize their thoughts and cherry-pick aspects of the game for use in their review—something that is impossible to do on a live stream. Twitch affords viewers an unedited experience of newly released games that may influence game sales—positively or negatively. Because Twitch is live, all aspects of a game are on display as the streamer provides their personal opinions and impressions of the game. The audience, with their ability to communicate directly with the streamer, can make suggestions, ask questions, and discuss aspects of the game to get a customized review.

Based on the information gathered in Table 4, streamers who prioritize chat engagement tend to have a lower overall energy level. Those streamers who are involved in gameplay, however, draw their energy from content of the game being played. Games with a high level of suspense result in higher energy levels exhibited in the streamer. This energy is transferred the viewer in the form of entertainment value. Due to this phenomenon, high stress games, such as those in the horror genre or competitive high stake games, draw large audiences on Twitch.

Table 3.

Streamer	Game Opinions			
	None (0)	Seldom (1)	Often (2)	Constant (3)
NeffNaps (>100 viewers)	0			
DizzyKitten (1,000–5,000 viewers)		1		
MeggiPlays (1,000–5,000 viewers)		1		
RubberRoss (1,000–5,000 viewers)				3
TimtheTatMan (>10,000 viewers)			2	

Table 4.

Streamer	Energy			
	Low (0)	Sporadic (1)	Medium (2)	High (3)
NeffNaps (>100 viewers)	0			
DizzyKitten (1,000–5,000 viewers)	0			
MeggiPlays (1,000–5,000 viewers)			2	
RubberRoss (1,000–5,000 viewers)			2	
TimtheTatMan (>10,000 viewers)			2	

Conclusion

Based on the gathered data, viewers are drawn most heavily by gameplay and skill level, followed by the streamer's interactivity with the chat, the streamer's energy, and game impressions respectively. Pro-level gamers draw the largest audiences, followed by energetic, interactive streamers. Many "startup" streamers tend to focus on interacting with viewers in order to build a loyal fan base instead of putting all of their effort into playing to the best of their ability. Gaming skill takes practice and varies from player to player, so it is easier to prioritize community building rather than gameplay.

Once a streamer has built up a fan base, their popularity has the chance to grow via word of mouth, as well as rising on Twitch's "highest to lowest" viewer count filter. Another way to rise in popularity is to play multiplayer games with other well-known streamers. Cooperation between streamers is mutually beneficial as both audiences are exposed to new personalities, which is one of the main methods of growing a channel on Twitch.

Uses and Gratifications theory states that users will seek the most effective and efficient tool to gratify their needs. Users come to Twitch for a variety of reasons (community building, game reviews, entertainment, etc.), all of which can be gratified instantly by its live, real-time format.

Zero Lives Gaming

I have combined the most successful elements of each of the observed streamers in order to create a successful Twitch channel. Twitch streamers rarely gain popularity quickly, however, I have accelerated the popularity of my channel by analyzing users and utilizing uses and gratifications theory to fulfill the needs of viewers.

Creating My Own Twitch Channel

The very first step in creating a twitch channel is registering for a free twitch.tv account. All Twitch accounts provide the ability to become a content creator. Most modern gaming consoles (Xbox and Playstation) have Twitch streaming integration pre-loaded into their operating systems. While this is great for users who want to dip their toes in the water of content creation, there are major limitations to access of key features of Twitch, such as chat visibility and content tagging.

In order to access all features of Twitch streaming, I used a free computer program called OBS (Open Broadcaster Software) that captures footage and streams it directly to Twitch. Streaming via OBS allows creators to control the visual experience for the viewer. For example, I can stream full-screen footage from my webcam and immediately switch to a preset "scene" where the webcam is reduced in size and placed on top of live video game footage. Another major benefit of using OBS is the real-time chat appears right inside of OBS, allowing the streamer to keep up with interaction with the chat stream easily from one computer window. As seen in figure 1 (next page), I set my stream up to feature a small window of live webcam footage on top of the full-screen window of whatever game I am playing.

Once the visuals of the stream were set up, I invested in sound equipment to attain professional sound quality. To that end, I purchased several Rode NT1-A microphones, a microphone boom arm to easily adjust its position during stream, and the Rode RodecasterPro
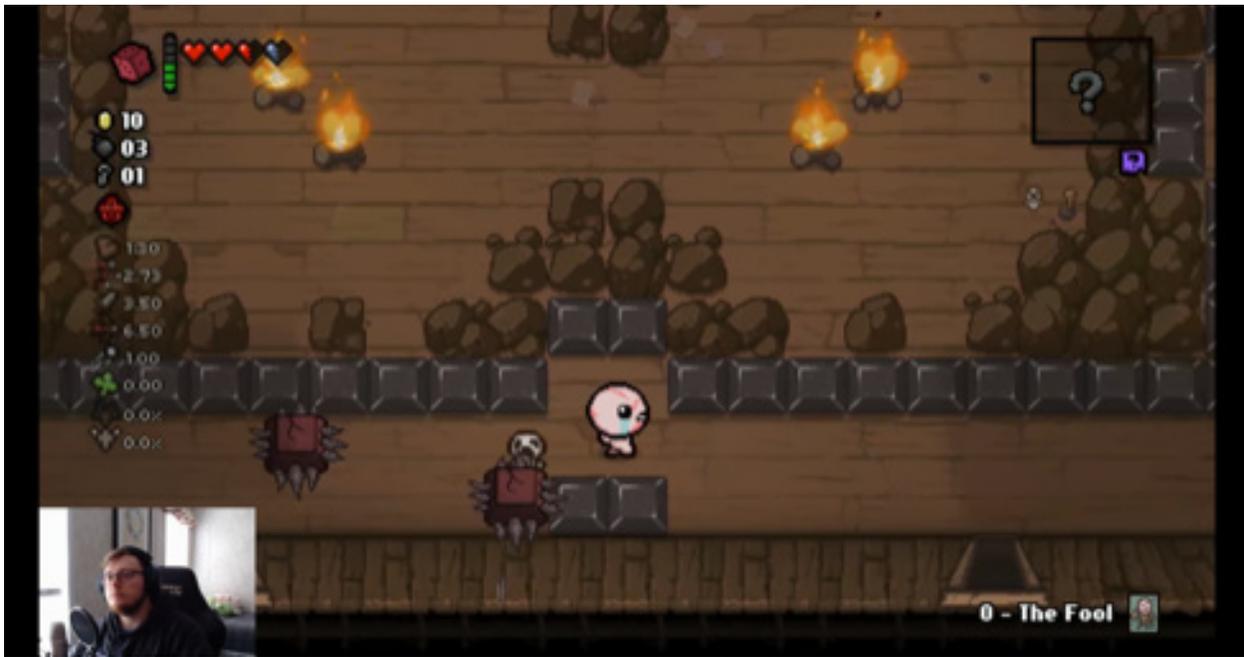
Figure 1

mixing board to convert the XLR microphones' signal into one that the computer could process.

Once a user chooses a specific type of content to watch, they are given a list of channels to choose from. Aside from the typical sorting method of "most viewers to least viewers," users can choose a channel to watch based on specific tags listed, such as "english," "backseat gaming allowed," or "RPG" (role-playing game), among countless other tags, which are chosen by the streamer prior to going live on Twitch. I ensure that content tags are up to date and specific enough to draw in viewers.

Branding

Once the technical aspects of streaming were addressed, the last step was to personalize the channel. This included naming the channel, creating a logo, and writing a short "bio" consisting of my name and interests. Creating a Twitch channel is essentially the same as creating a brand. On a

social media platform that is so visual like Twitch, users only have so many factors to choose from when tuning into a new channel. Among these are the specific content being streamed, current viewer count, streamer specified tags, username, and profile picture.

The name, Zero Lives Gaming, was chosen as a play on the typical "game over" mechanic in video games combined with the social depiction of a gamer as having "no life." The logo, shown in Figure 2, was created by using a pixelated font to be reminiscent of 8-bit video games combined with three empty heart containers that signify a game over.

Figure 2

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