Loneliness Behind Live Streaming: Exploration of Alone Together in Live streaming in the Version of Interactive Ritual Chain

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays live streaming has become a popular internet entertainment which occupies people a lot of time. However, under the surface, are people truly take a good time while watching live streaming or it's just a waste of time? In this paper, two well-known theory "Alone Together" and "Interactive Ritual Chain" are mentioned and connected to explain if people are in a kind of group loneliness while watching live streaming and why it is happening through interactive ritual chain. In-depth interview is taken as the research method which four interviewees gave their answer on questions related to such problems. The paper finds out that it is easy to fall into group loneliness but it is also possible for people to get rid of it. With the expansion interactive ritual chain, online socializing has partially replaced offline socializing and people may be able to meet their emotional need through online socializing. Finally, two questions are arisen about the "Alone Together" due to the finding of the research, and this article hopes it can give some inspirations on relevant problems.

Keywords: Live Streaming, Alone Together, Interactive Ritual Chain

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background: The rise of live streaming

Live streaming has gradually come into the public's view since 2016. As an emerging social network that uses video to broadcast live online, it soon occupied the lives of the public. As "2021 China live streaming industry analysis business report - the depth of the market analysis and developing trend analysis" [1] says, according to the data collected from recent years, with the continuous popularization of the Internet and information technology and the improvement of mobile phone's performance, the live streaming industry through smart phone were getting a good development. Especially in 2020, due to the impact of COVID-19, the demand for live streaming services has exploded, leading to a rapid growth in the size of the live streaming market and users. Data show that in 2019, the market size of live streaming in China was 84.34 billion yuan, with a year-on-year growth of 63.4%; it is estimated that the market size will exceed 150 billion yuan in 2020. By the end of December 2020, there were 617 million users of live streaming in China, 220

million more than that at the end of December 2018. The live streaming industry is characterized by strong interaction in the form of live broadcast and the ability to classify live broadcast according to different groups, so as to improve user stickiness and meet users' entertainment needs.

With increasingly popular appearance of live streaming, more and more scholars have attached the importance of the phenomenon of "Alone Together" of live streaming users [2]. Based on this phenomenon and the interactive ritual chain theory proposed by Randall Collins [3], this paper hopes to explore whether online interactive live streaming will have an interactive impact on group loneliness.

1.2. Research purpose and significance

The purpose of this paper is to explore whether online interactive live streaming can alleviate the group loneliness of its audience in a real sense, or whether the audience will fall into a deeper social existential crisis due to the establishment of "Interactive Ritual Chain" during live streaming. Therefore, this paper hopes that based on the existing research of "Alone Together" and

"Interactive Ritual Chain", to associate the context created in the interactive process of live streaming and the psychological activities of participants during such process (including anchors as content creators and users as audiences), and explore the relationship between them. Furthermore, to explore the deeper academic principles and psychological causes hidden under the explosion of live streaming, which is exactly the significance of this study.

1.3. literature review

1.3.1. Research status of "Alone Together" in live streaming

The concept of group loneliness comes from Sherry Turkle's "Alone Together" [2] has long been used to study on the emotional impact of internet socializing. In Dong Chen's Research: "Group Loneliness under Virtual Social Interaction" [4], it mentioned that "they can shield things they are not interested in in social networks, and only participate in topics and events they are interested in'". Therefore, in the context of social network, the group can also be lonely. Online live streaming platforms make people in the online world have an illusion that loneliness and isolation in the real society can be released from live streaming, which misleading them to find the value meaning of individuals in the group. Just as Liu Xiuqing and Zhang Rong mentioned in their article "Emotional Representation and Emotional Dilemma of Online Live streaming" [5], the more intense the carnival for online live broadcast, once people get rid of the temporary comfort of loneliness in real society brought by social media, "Group loneliness" is more likely to occur when people break away from the network platform and enter the real society.

1.3.2. Research status of " Interactive Ritual Chain" in live streaming

"In a holistic spatial environment, the individual becomes (or will become) a member of the present gathering wherever he enters its interior."[6]. This is the point of View put forward by Irving Goffman's Situational Interaction Theory. On this basis, the sociologist Randall Collins in 2004 formally put forward the concept of "Interactive Ritual Chain" [3], which infers to the interaction (ceremony) is the rules of behavior and the power source of the society, "each individual in society the rendered image is gradually formed in its social interaction with others" [7].

Obviously, the so-called "live streaming room" is a special context of "Interactive Ritual Chain". This paper reviews some literatures on this special context, such as "Virtual Presence: Interactive Ritual Chain of Online Fan Community" [7] by Pan Shuya and Zhang Yuqi. Through the study of fans who watch movies together on several online film and television platforms, it is proposed that under virtual interaction, fans will obtain a clear identity and generate emotional connection. LeiNing form Xi'an Jiaotong University's "The Interactive Ritual Chain Study on Online Gaming Live Platform" [8] takes Douyu TV as an example, selectively by the method of content analysis and in-depth interviews, discovers that live streaming will give participants an emotion stimulus, and translate into emotional energy on the participants themselves again, promote themselves to participate in the interaction of cycle. In the artical "Symbolic Capital and Emotional Energy: An Analysis of Live Streaming Interaction from the Perspective of Interactive Ritual Chain" [9] by Huang Ying and Wang Maolin found through focus group interview that this "emotional energy" can not only strengthen group identity, but also further promote the generation of moral sense to maintain group symbols.

To sum up, it is not difficult to find that under the interactive ceremony of live broadcast, the emotions of the audience will be affected accordingly, thus affecting their psychological state. Therefore, it is certain that the interactive ritual and the group loneliness of the user group can have a relationship, or even have a mutual influence.

1.4. Research Method

In-depth interview is a kind of social science research method, which collects research data by talking with researchers and respondents. It has been widely used in qualitative research of social science. There are many types and uses of social science research interviews. According to the ways of interviews, this paper chooses direct interviews, selects interviewees through purpose sampling and snowball sampling, sets interview frame table for them, and designs semi-structured interview model. Finally, it explores the emotional state of users of live streaming from the perspective of interactive ritual chain and the influence of live streaming on them.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. The Definition of loneliness in the Context

According to Lin Bin and Jiang Hong's "Reflection on "Group Loneliness": Alone Together" [10], we can take a group's lonely state described as a kind of a lack of social space, which infers that people may originally want to expand their social space through a social media platform, while they not only failed to make more friends to ease their state of loneliness, but also being obsessing with entertainment through the social media, and thus fell into the trap of social media. At this point, we can think of people who spend their time constantly checking their phones and playing computer games, but fail to engage in effective social interaction, as entering a state of group

loneliness, as if they have seen the colorful world, share emotions and information with many people, but remain alone.

2.2. Data collecting

2.2.1. Sampling Method

The research used the method of combining the purpose sampling and snowball sampling to sample the interviewees in depth interview. In the practical process, due to some restrictions, there were only two bilibilii anchors "珞璃_Official" (female, hereinafter referred to as RURI) and "_かがみ_镜" (male, hereinafter referred to as Kim) are able to participate in the in-depth interviews as anchors. For fans who watches live streaming, the research selects a male (Akam) and a female (Hashtag) from the fan groups of the two anchors based on the length of exposure to live streaming and the average daily length of watching live streaming to participate in in-depth interviews from the perspective of live streaming users.

2.2.2. Basic Information of Interviewees

Four interviewees are selected for this interview, including one male and one female for anchors and user. All interviewees are users of bilibili, a video website, and have been used it for at least three years. Among them, Kim and Akam (both male) have been in contact with live broadcasting for a long time. Kim has 7 years of live streaming experience since 2014, while Akam has 6 years of experience in watching live streaming. Kim is now takeing live streaming as a full-time job. Akam currently has no job. RURI began live-streaming in March 2021, and Hashtag (both female) is a loyal fan of her and she has more than half a year of live-streaming watching experience, but both of them were exposed to other live-streaming content before that. RURI ha a job as a planner in a celebration company and live streaming is a part time job for her. All respondents spend more than 6 hours a day in contact with live streaming. Hashtag is a civil servant.

2.3. Analysis Criteria of Interview Content

In the context of live streaming, participants will be divided into users and anchors. Anchors mainly interact with each audience through the explanation of the broadcast content, express the content and their emotions. In addition, the selection of background music can also help the anchors to give emotional feedback. However, users generally exchange information through bullet screen to share their current emotions and thoughts with anchors and other users. And through using virtual props, which is a kind of rewards, to express their emotions and convey feelings. At the same time, users will also get feedback from anchors and replies from other users to get

certain emotional experience, so as to achieve a state of shared or even collective excitement. During live streaming, the collective excitement would bring emotional stimulation. when such emotional stimulation becomes more and more frequent, emotional stimulation can bring a large amount of emotional energy, and with the maximum formation of emotional energy, it will act on participants again, making them interact in a cycle. Thus, how participant act in the interactive ritual chain is the thing counts.

2.4. Analysis of interview results

2.4.1. The participants' communication during the live streaming is conscious

For anchors, "To communicate with bullet screen is part of work" (RURI& Kim), so they pay relatively high attention to communication. However, for users, they are more willing to participate in the interaction when the content they are concerned about is involved, and they can consciously realize participation behavior of other users, such as "The content they are interested in... (I will notice) what other bullet scream says "(Akam) and" Belong to like-minded... I send bullet scream based entirely on what others are saying "(Hashtag).

2.4.2. Participants focus on the content of the live streaming

In the process of live streaming, both anchors and users will focus on the content. "Make some communication according to what are currently talking about" (RURI&Kim); "(Content that I am not interested in) will be ignored... If you are interested, you will certainly say more "(Akam); "Talk about the current topic" (Hashtag).

2.4.3. Participants can get emotional stimulation through bullet screen communication

When participating in the interaction, participants can get emotional stimulation from the interaction process, "(I) like to communicate with the bullet screen...... Positive content will be happy "(RURI); "I don't really have a sense of like it or not, but it's nice to have someone talking about you" (Kim); "There should be some satisfaction (in getting feedback from a bullet scream)" (Akam); "(To communicate with bullet scream is) Not for anything, and forget what I made, but happy when I made it" (Hashtag). As we can see, participants were in a better state of mind and even gain happiness with positive feedback.

2.4.4. Participants become more willing to interact after receiving feedback

"Only when you have feedback can you make a better broadcast, (if there are) someone who are willing to communicate I will definitely (talk with him/her more)" (RURI); "For sure (I) like the positive feedback" (Kim); "(Bullet scream interaction) attracts each other and causes issues together ("issues" refers to free communication)" (Hashtag). After receiving the positive feedback, the positive emotions will promote the anchors and users to conduct more feedback behaviors.

2.4.5. Group loneliness of participants

For anchors, group loneliness of theris is relatively difficult to define. "(Before broadcasting), join in some plays and have social with friends a lot" (RURI). "Take the dog for a walk, go to the gym, drink with friends in dinner" (Kim). Based on the statements of interviewees, the paper believes that anchors have certain offline social activities when they are not live streaming. However, due to the relatively long time occupied by live streaming, anchors can still be considered to be in a state of group loneliness during work. For users, watching live broadcast for a long time is itself a manifestation of group loneliness. "It's just the routine when you're at our age, there's pretty much work to do... It's not easy to have time to watch videos and play video games... Watching the live streaming itself is a way to kill time." (Akam); "I am tired out from work... I don't really want to go out... (Watching live streaming can be) Enough to kill time "(Hashtag). This kind of psychological cocoon of killing time is exactly what this article hopes to warn.

2.4.6. Participants make social behaviors by participating in live streaming

For anchor, live streaming is a kind of work, the anchors sometimes may need do live streaming with other anchors (like playing games or singing together), and with the joint and communication of more and more audience, the anchors can carry on with some social during live streaming. Interviewees (RURI&Kim) thought "live streaming is a kind of socializing"; for users, the communication and interaction under the extension of live streaming can help them socialize more. Both interviewees said that they "made a lot of friends" in the QQ fan groups of anchors. "(Hashtag) "Definitely made friends" (Akam).

3. ONLINE SOCIALIZING START TO PARTIALLY REPLACES OFFLINE SOCIALIZING

"I feel good to play with people in the live streaming room (after I start broadcasting)." (RURI) "There's a lot of offline socializing when you're out of live streaming...

but it's also good to make friends in live streaming room "(Kim); "(Playing video games with other fans) is like relaxing after coming home from work" (Akam); "For now, basically, 80% or 90% of the socializing of mine is in this QQ fan group" (Hashtag). All interviewees believe that online social behaviors can meet or partly meet their social needs. Therefore, online interactions and social behaviors can replace offline social behaviors.

What's more, such online socializing has the potential become an offline one in some cases. "Some fans have already become really good friends of mine. One of them I even went to his weddings. We went out to restaurants together many times." (Kim); "*** (a fans group friends) will come to me for dinner in a couple of days" (Akam); "There was a plan... But because of the Covid-19 (it failed) ... It is not a convenient for now." (Hashtag).

Through in-depth interviews, the paper finds that participants of live streaming can clearly realize the existence of other participants in the space (refers to the live streaming room), and will carry out interactive behaviors centering on the common focus, which means the content of live streaming. Interactive participants can get emotional stimulation through live streaming, but watching it for a long time is definitely a typical performance of group loneliness, and for anchors who streaming for a long time each day it is also highly possible that they are in group loneliness as well. However, for anchors, they are more likely to engage in online socializing through live streaming. For users , the extension of interaction is helpful to relieve or even get rid of group loneliness, and such online social behavior may extend to offline.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1. Research result

Through to the decomposition of the operation mechanism of interactive ritual chain, this article explains the use of emotional stimuli in the live streaming of the group alone state, and then explains the possibility which because of emotional stimulation and group sharing, people may mistakenly think that they are no longer lonely in state of mind. But, as a matter of fact, such people tend to lack of effective offline socializing and addicted to web technology and content. Therefore, ineffective internet using, indulging in internet entertainment content, ignoring or even refusing to socialize are all manifestations of group loneliness. And including living streaming, browsing internet content for a long time, such as Douyin, Weibo and Xiaohongshu, implies that people are likely to be in group loneliness. The best way to solve this problem is to communicate with people. Through in-depth interviews, the paper finds that participation and extension of interaction can help people get rid of the state of group loneliness. When people not only understand and browse the content

through the Internet technology, but also start to communicate with people on the other side of the Internet, then it may be the moment when people really get rid of the limitation of the internet technology itself and back to be set free.

4.2. Introspection

The following two questions arise in the study of the definition of group loneliness.

First of all, the theory of "Alone Together" is undoubtedly a point of view of technological pessimism, as people cannot get rid of the internet technology addiction. However, in the actual research, the paper finds that people's social behaviors also have the possibility to develop offline socializing through media technology. Therefore, the paper believes that group loneliness can be alleviated or even solved through Internet technology.

Secondly, through study of this paper, effective offline social interaction is always taken as the evaluation standard of group loneliness, but whether people are really lonely? Perhaps in the internet age, media technologies are gradually changing people's adaptive patterns, and the concept of effective social interaction should not be limited to offline social interaction. The paper wants to argue that in the follow-up research on group loneliness, it may be possible to put the theory in the context of the internet to more specifically subdivide the concept of effective social interaction, and whether the online social interaction can be regarded as an effective social state to get out of group loneliness to a certain extent or meet certain conditions.

4.3. Limitation and the direction of future improvement

The sampling of this in-depth interview has limitations. Due to limited conditions, only two anchors can participate in the interview, and the live streaming duration and content of the interviewed anchors are different, so the sampling itself is not completely reasonable. In addition, due to Covid-19, online interview was adopted for the interview. Under the limitations of software and hardware, the interview process might not fully meet academic requirements. In addition, qualitative research has no universality and promotion significance, and the relationship between live streaming and group loneliness still needs more extensive verification.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Yifan Wu.

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