Overview

Previously available only to large, commercial media outlets, social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook have now made live streaming available to the masses. This research explores the role of social connection in the consumption experiences of live streams. While previous research has studied the role of indeterminacy in people's expectations of enjoyment of live television [1], no work has examined the effects of this new type of live content on actual experiences. Live streaming differs from live television in that it is more intimate and personal, and the simultaneous audience is more salient. Building on the literature on co-experience and simultaneity [2,3] we hypothesized that viewers of live (versus prerecorded) content would feel more socially connected to others while watching, and that this would in turn increase their overall enjoyment.

Using a unique interface that we developed, we show that people enjoy the exact same video more when they believe it is live than when they believe it is prerecorded. This effect is driven by social connection, and operates above and beyond indeterminacy.

Study 1

- 2X3 between-subjects design, N = 401, mTurk
- Participants were told that they would be watching one of three short videos (as a stimulus sample), and were randomly assigned to learn that the video was either 1) streaming live, or 2) recently recorded.
- Three randomly-assigned videos (Zumba lesson, music concert, political Q&A). There was no significant interaction between stream mode and content, so we collapsed across content conditions.
- Participants reported their expected enjoyment of the video (expect to enjoy, excited to watch; α=0.94) and their expected sense of a social connection (expect to feel connected to other viewers; alone, a shared social experience; α=0.82).

Study 2 Behavioral measures

- At the end of the survey, participants were asked to make an additional viewing selection. They could spend 2 minutes watching any of the 6 videos (with the same stream mode: live or prerecorded) or an outside option (a new cartoon that we introduced).
- The results extend our findings from study 1 to real viewing experiences. While watching the exact same content, participants who thought that the video was streaming live (vs. recently recorded) actually enjoyed it more and reported feeling more socially connected.
- Once again, social connection fully mediated the effect of live on enjoyment (95% CI [0.05,0.27]).

Study 3

If enjoyment of live content is driven by a sense of social connection, then the value of live should be reduced when people already feel connected (i.e., are watching in a group).
- 2 (stream type: live, prerecorded) X 2 (viewing mode: alone, in a group) between-subjects design, N = 620, mTurk
- Same procedure as Study 2, except that some participants watched the videos alone while others watched in a group with 5 other mTurkers.

Conclusions

- People expect to and do enjoy the exact same content more when they believe it is streaming live compared to when they believe it is prerecorded. This effect is driven by a sense of social connection.
- People choose to continue watching live content more than prerecorded content, and are more interested in attending similar events in real life.
- Future studies will further explore the social connection mechanism.
- Will people choose to watch content live more when they have a greater need for social connection?
- Do viewers of live content feel more connected to the broadcaster, to the audience, or to other simultaneous viewers?

References