Charitable YouTube Discourse: Markiplier and the Elements of Online Communication

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Utilizing the tools presented to them by modern technological realms, amateur creators are beginning to dominate the cultural conversation regarding the opportunities of the new Internet. At the forefront of the Web 2.0 revolution are the popular content-creators on YouTube, who each foster a growing fan base upon which they can have significant influence. Currently, one of the fastest growing personalities, Mark Fischbach, who operates under the handle "Markiplier," has unlocked new potential for his large audience. Markiplier's main content consists of commentary, walkthroughs, and recorded reactions to various video games. He belongs to an expansive YouTube network of "Let's Players" in the online gaming community, whose video content consists of similar elements. These types of videos tend to attract a lot of viewers because of their unique and relatable nature; it reminds the viewer of their own experiences while playing video games.

Markiplier not only plays video games for a vast audience, but also uses his Internet platform to create a positive impact on society. Over the last three years, Markiplier has raised over half a million dollars for various charities such as Cancer Research Institute (CRI), AbleGamers, and Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA). He conducts these efforts through "charity live-streams" on the streaming site Twitch. He also takes many opportunities to spread positivity and encouragement among his fans by directly interacting with them through social media and his videos. The members of his discourse community, an established social group, take his words to heart, and rally to act upon his suggestions. In the new age of communicative technology, a charitable force such as this should not be ignored. In order to understand how Markiplier does what he does, I asked myself: Through uplifting interaction with his audience, how does a YouTuber like Markiplier achieve success in raising money for charity and creating an inspirational environment and what are the rhetorical elements surrounding his use of personal videos and social media? As I've discovered through my study, Markiplier achieves charitable success by displaying positive regard to each fan individually, emphasizing the importance of the community as a whole, and encouraging them to have confidence and to use their talents for the good of others.

The phenomenon that occurs through Markiplier's work seems to go predominantly unnoticed by the mainstream media, which is particularly problematic; researchers are less likely to explore charitable efforts made by a medium with a niche audience. In regards to the areas surrounding his work, however, there has been a lengthier amount of study. From the time the Internet became a major player in society, research has sought to explore the possibilities that it presented. A lot of the focus tends to gravitate toward the nature of how the Internet allows us to communicate with others in new ways. Interaction capabilities between people have increased

dramatically through the use of the Internet. Those who argue that the Internet has positive effects on communication often mention the instantaneous and global nature of email, blogs, and social media sites as an encouragement to people who wish to build connections with others that share common values. This is seen most notably in the popularization of social media and networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. These kinds of sites are the most commonly referenced in Web 2.0 when discussing Internet communicative efforts, and they are precisely the sites Markiplier utilizes in his own work.

Review of Literature
Social Media Communication

Social networks that organize on the Internet have introduced radical change in the way society communicates (Atton; Barnes; Berki and Jäkälä; Haenlein and Kaplan). Dualistic in nature, Berki and Jäkälä note that social media "offer[s] connections for individual users, [and] may also be used as tools to self-promotion and self-presentations" (3). Users of social media can interact with others in their circle and simultaneously make their voices heard in a broad spectrum. Barnes describes this online interaction as "not a solitary activity. . . [interaction] goes beyond the individual and into the mode of identity and social construction" (234). The ideas and identities that are enabled to be shared through social media cater well to fandom building and activity motivators. The way Markiplier uses social media to facilitate his interaction with his fandom may be in accordance with its potential as an effective communication medium, especially to a global community with whom he cannot realistically interact with otherwise. Because of this, achieving a considerably large platform for charity becomes easier for Markiplier. He can share information about the charities he chooses, as well as address individuals in the same breath.

YouTube: Video Broadcasting and Participatory Culture

Because of its communicative nature, exhibited through the comment system, YouTube works well alongside social media, and acts as Markiplier's main site of communication. When evaluating the success of YouTube as a societal influencer, most researchers note the innovative nature of user-generated content and participatory culture on the site (Burgess and Green; Morreale; Andrejevic). Communication through YouTube videos allows users to broadcast themselves and receive exposure that was never possible before. As the result of a turning point, Hsuan-Ting Chen notes that "audiences began to be regarded as content providers instead of content consumers" (7) and as such, ordinary people now "have a platform for communicating to the public or to other users" (7). Noting the communicative-oriented design of video sharing, Dynel recognizes that YouTube is "characterized by speakers' and hearers' spatial and temporal separation and infinite numbers of potential participants at the reception end" (37). This means that, no matter the distance between creator and audience, a creator's message or product can be heard. This fact demonstrates how YouTube exists as a global entity: it transcends physical boundaries, and broader communication is achieved. Chen and Dynel both agree that YouTube is unique in that amateur content becomes the forerunner and foundation of mass communication, instead of relying on traditional media exposure, such as television or radio. Burgess and Green argue that YouTube's relatively simple interface is a major factor in assisting new users; stating "[its] design may not be elegant, but it is famously usable. . . . [I]ts usability is undoubtedly one of the reasons for its mass popularization" (64). With that usability in mind, it's easy to see how a participatory culture on YouTube took off in such a spectacular way. Users can easily upload videos and their work can be distributed through a community-oriented interface that helps content-creators grow.

Discourse Community Theory and Activity Systems

When YouTube content-creators do grow, discourse communities are established in response. As a result of the collective effort of like-minded individuals, discourse communities and activity systems have the potential to facilitate meaningful interactions. This tendency emphasizes the notion that rhetoric is inherently a social endeavor. Many scholars agree that the intrinsic interactive value in rhetorical communities can help mediate activity (Bazerman; Covino and Jolliffe; Swales). When a discourse community begins to form, their identity becomes encoded in actions they take and the text they may produce. Broadhead and Freed, scholars in the realm of business with emphasis on its social aspects, assert that "standardization occurs. . . through various establishments by which a community names and defines itself" (155). This standardization, while not always rigid and formal, creates a sense of purpose and identity.

Along with it comes the notion of activity systems, which Kain and Wardle explain consist of "mutual agreement about how the activity will be carried out so [that community can] progress toward the outcome" (276). This relates heavily to the previously mentioned idea of participatory culture, as the communication required to decide upon specific activities requires members to actively engage. Participation in activities helps the community grow. Combining all of these observations together reveals a pattern that points toward communication and shared goals as the meaning of a discourse community's existence. When connecting back to the topic of Markiplier's community being a vehicle for charity, one can see how the individuals that claim membership are important to deciding the future of the community's endeavors. This is why the direction and influence Markiplier has over his fans is so important.

The Nature of Fandoms

Fandom exists as a specific type of discourse community, one that rallies around a central text, person, or concept. An individual can consume their desired materials independently, but fandom allows that person to share their ideas and reactions with others who also enjoy the same thing. In fact, Henry Jenkins, professor of Communication, Journalism, and Cinematic Arts, defines fan communities predominantly by this area of social interaction amongst members. He characterizes fandom by its "ability to transform personal reaction into social interaction, [and] spectatorial culture into participatory culture" (41). Because of its capability to bring people together, fan culture can also be an effective means of organizing for external events or outreaches. In a study regarding the global citizenship of fandom members, Plante and her team of Psychology and Social Development researchers found that those "outside of the group. . . [can] benefit through the mobilization of group resources for charity, public education, and community-building activities" (50). Gathering all these observations about fandom culture leads to support for the idea of fan communities as a successful motivator for significant activity. Fandom demonstrates activity theory well, and Markiplier's fandom exists as an ideal example.

Methods

In order to better understand exactly how Markiplier addresses and communicates with his fans, I needed to conduct a thorough analysis of his documented interactions through his videos and social media posts. To do this, I selected a predetermined number of posts (ten YouTube vlogs, twenty-five Tumblr posts, and fifty Tweets), chosen at random after determining their level of interaction. If a Tweet or Tumblr post was not already made in direct response to a fan, I determined a high level of interaction by a larger number of "retweets" and "reblogs." Because Markiplier uses social media as an advertising platform in some cases, I chose the posts that specifically deal with Markiplier sharing personal stories or speaking directly to a fan or multiple fans. Because the potential for bias lies with the choosing of vlogs, of which I have watched many

before, I opened the "Markiplier Vlogs" playlist on Markiplier's channel and selected ten to watch based on a randomly generated number on random.org.

I analyzed word choices and made a record of the pathos and ethos that were utilized and in what context they were used. In these terms, pathos is the emotional appeal to the audience, pertaining mostly to individual encouragement, while ethos is the ethical appeal to the community's sense of charity. I noted the words and themes that seemed to appear predominantly. I assigned each vlog and social media post a category based on this observed rhetoric: Encouraging the Community (EC), which indicated that Markiplier encouraged his community as a whole, and often used the identifier "you guys" in reference to everyone who proclaimed membership in the fandom; Encouraging the Individual (EI), where Markiplier spoke in a manner that encouraged the viewer's personal endeavors and potential; Promoting Charity or Kindness (PC), when Markiplier encouraged views to donate to charities and be a positive influence to surrounding communities; Sharing a Personal Experience (PE), when Markiplier divulged certain happenings in his life and informed the viewer of his way of thinking; Giving Thanks (T), when he thanked the audience for their actions and having an impact on his life; and finally, Silly or Joking (S), when he addressed the audience is a good-intentioned, non-serious way. These categories could overlap if more than one of them appeared in the post.

In order to gauge the effectiveness of the rhetoric Markiplier uses, I also analyzed the responses that fans made toward these posts. To do this, I conducted a survey regarding viewers' perception of Markiplier's charity live-streams, Markiplier's community, and Markiplier himself (see Appendix). I constructed this survey using SurveyMonkey, and I distributed it by sharing in on Markiplier-oriented communities on social media, such as the Markiplier "tag" on Tumblr and the subreddit /r/Markiplier. In this survey, through ten questions, I asked each participant about their donating habits, their perception of the importance of Markiplier's charity endeavors, how Markiplier's rhetoric had impacted them, and what their emotional view of Markiplier was. I chose to use this survey to analyze viewer response due to the prevalence of spam in the YouTube comment section; this area has become ineffective in recent years due to the integration of Google+ and the inability to regulate unrelated comments cogently. The communities on Tumblr and Reddit provide much more genuine and organized responses.

Unfortunately, there are some limitations with the methods I have proposed. Due to the limits of non-premium accounts on SurveyMonkey, I had to cut several questions from my survey, as I could only have ten of them total. I had several other questions that I feel may have been useful, but I ultimately had to remove them. In addition, due to the sheer amount of posts Markiplier makes on social media, I had to be particular about which posts I chose to analyze, which might have opened my study up to slight bias. However, this occurrence could not be realistically circumvented, and I analyzed the posts I chose objectively as possible.

Results and Discussion

Markiplier displayed a considerable variety of rhetorical themes in his use of YouTube and social media; often these elements and word choices overlapped to create an overarching sentiment that lead to some defining traits. By analyzing these online interactions, I was able to discern Markiplier's style and identify what he felt was important while communicating with fans. Displaying Jenkins' observed phenomenon of spectatorial communities evolving into a participatory culture (41), Markiplier seems to actively take a role in facilitating it in his own community. And indeed, community seemed to be at the forefront of Markiplier's mind. When he encouraged each fan individually, using a common theme of pathos, he encouraged each fan to use their individual talents in turn to support a global community that focused on charity.

The Mainstay: Major Themes in YouTube Vlogs

Markiplier's rhetoric contained in his social media posts exhibited elements of pathos and ethos, often woven together due to the emotional nature of what he chose to talk about. In the selected vlogs on his main YouTube channel, Markiplier often engaged in inspiring hope regarding the charity work of the community. "You guys have so much more power than you know to change the world" (Markiplier, "Markiplier Sings?!") and "I'm so proud of what you guys have done" ("Believe") were common themes that were repeated throughout his videos. He ultimately approached this mentality by expressing his opinion that every member of his community had unlimited potential to do good in the world, which facilitated his interest in spreading charity. This was expressed most prominently in his vlog "Pursuit of Happiness." While he indeed built on the esteem of the viewer, he more-often-than-not quickly connected it back to his community. This suggests that Markiplier displays a high opinion of the members of his fandom. This leads into another popular topic, in which he often expressed his love for every fan individually. He repeatedly remarked that he owed his success to the dedication of his fans, noting in particular, "I just always have to make sure that I thank you guys for literally changing my life" ("An Important Message"). This explains why he might be so adamant in giving back in his words and personal regard. This goes a long way in defining Markiplier's style of rhetoric: one that places the needs and esteem of his fans in high status. While he ultimately did not believe he was "in charge" of his fans, he did indicate that he took his leadership role seriously.

Categorizing Social Media: Popular Trends

After assigning each YouTube vlog, Tweet, and Tumblr post a category, or categories, I discovered how Markiplier uses different social media platforms in different ways.

Each site seemed to follow a trend based on how the categories were represented on average. For example, in his Tweets, elements of "Encouraging the Individual" (which occurs when Markiplier offers personal, motivational advice or kind words) appeared in 26 of the 50 Tweets, making up 52% of that rhetoric. The two categories that followed were "Giving Thanks" and "Silly or Joking Responses," with 26% and 22%, respectively. This suggests that this social media site, utilizing the art of the short responses (under 140 characters), is the best suited for responding personally to fans or offering encouragement. Additionally, 50% of the tweets collected were in direct response to a fan who contacted him. In comparison, only 28% of Tumblr posts were direct responses, and only 20% of posts satisfied "Encouraging the Individual." YouTube videos were more of a mixed bag category-wise, with many of the ten videos satisfying a multitude of categories in a way the others didn't. YouTube videos more prominently featured "Sharing a Personal Experience," appearing in 90% of his videos. When Markiplier shares his stories with fans, he displays Barnes' notion of creating an identity within the realm of a social network. In this context, Markiplier illustrates the extending "boundaries and nature of self, [the] social world, and the relationship between the two" (234), which Barnes attributes to social media.

Each social media outlet, unintentional or not, seems to serve a purpose. This might suggest that online communication is effective when dealing with a multitude of people; it makes interaction seamless, and helps it appear less cluttered or disengaged. This understanding of how Markiplier uses social media provides a model of Kain and Wardle's definition of activity theory. When analyzing different methods of fan communication, one can account "for aspects of a system to better understand the nature of activity. . . [and] anticipate participants' needs and goals" (279). Different needs and issues within the community can be met in different ways.

Fandom Response: Survey Findings

So, how did this rhetoric personally affect his audience? In the distributed survey, it was revealed that much of Markiplier's rhetoric indeed had a profound impact on his viewers. When asked about a personal experience with Markiplier's rhetoric, a telling 82.89% of respondents

agreed that Markiplier had positively impacted them emotionally in some way. When asked to specify about the instance or multiple instances, a majority indicated how Markiplier had helped them with depression. One respondent in particular said, "I realized that there was always a light at the end of every tunnel," when asked how Markiplier's words affected them. Markiplier also seemed to encourage and motivate fans to do good. Another respondent phrased it this way: "Whenever I find myself hesitating at the end of one of life's diving boards and needing some extra confidence/inspiration to jump, I think about the splash Mark's made in his own life." Another big theme amongst fans was that through his interaction, Markiplier sometimes felt like a friend they needed in hard times. Specifically, one fan claimed that Markiplier's words "make my day a little easier to get through, because he's honestly the only one who tells me that [I matter] and I need it so badly." These are incredibly important discoveries, as they indicate that Markiplier's rhetoric created a successful air of positivity and emotional health.

Charity also seemed to be an area of great significance to the fans. While only 38.46% of respondents had been able to donate during the live-streams, 58.96% considered the live-streams "Very Important," and the remaining 41.03% considered them "Important." These findings seem to demonstrate the aforementioned Kain and Wardle theory about mutual agreements in an activity community; positivity towards charity and championing charity efforts seems to be a key component here. Additionally, in regards to charity knowledge, over 97% of respondents claimed that Markiplier had, at one point, made them aware of a charity that they previously did not know about. This suggests that Markiplier's live-streams are a good way of spreading the word about trustworthy charities. In fact, many respondents noted that they felt his charities were a good outlet for their desire to donate; rallying crowd-funding, making it easier, and building a trust in the charity and what Markiplier thought was important were common elements. As one respondent claims, "I believe that Mark does his best to select charities that are honest and transparent, and that are in need of recognition/the spotlight his live-streams put on them." This confidence in the legitimacy of the charity could prompt a larger number to donate.

Several respondents also noted that, if they didn't donate already, they intended to, and they indicated a sense of disappointment due to their inability to donate at the present time, sharing different ways they helped the cause. One fan shared, "Unfortunately I have not been able to donate during a charity live-stream because I'm a college student on a tight budget. I share news of the live-streams on Facebook and get some friends to watch with me." Many responses have similar explanations. This suggests that the reason 61.54% of fans that did not donate was not because of apathy, but because of external constraints such as lack of funds and time. Because of the personal connection that is evident through the expressed sentiments of his fans, Markiplier is able to generate trust, and thus makes crowdfunding for charity easier.

Conclusion

Markiplier achieves charitable success by displaying positive regard to each fan individually, emphasizing the importance of the community as a whole, and encouraging them to have confidence and to use their talents for the good of charity and kind deeds to others. As of April 2015, Markiplier has over seven million people that make up his fan base. When so many people are directed to a cause as Markiplier encourages, the potential for good to be done by these communities is huge. While the community seems adept to operate on their own, and doesn't require attention to keep up their activities, Markiplier's style and medium deserves recognition of merit. In transforming modern views, Markiplier and his community stands as an example of how new, technological mediums can be used in ways never thought of before, in order to benefit humanity. It all begins with understanding the rhetorical value of Markiplier's operations.

Because there are many different YouTube content-creators, a valuable expansion on this study might be to compare Markiplier's rhetoric with that of another YouTuber, or multiple

YouTubers. This study only looked at his work, specifically, leaving a lot of room for unanswered questions regarding the consistency of his attitude as it appears in his expanding network. Is Markiplier's community an exceptional derivative, or is it the rule in the new age of social media? Further study might explain and analyze these trends to discover an expanding niche.

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Appendix

Markiplier Charity and Community

✱1. Have you ever donated during one of Markiplier's charity livestreams?

○ Yes

○ No

2. If yes, how did you feel when donating? (Check all that apply)

☐ Proud

☐ Happy

☐ Regretful

☐ Motivated

☐ Annoyed

☐ Inspired

☐ Hopeful

☐ Sad

☐ Other (please specify)

3. If yes, why did you donate?

✱4. Has Markiplier ever made you aware of a charity that you previously did not know about?

○ Yes

○ No

✱5. Do you donate regularly outside of Markiplier's charity livestreams?

○ Yes

○ No

✱6. How important do you consider Markiplier's charity livestreams to be?

	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
Check the answer that is the closest to your opinion.	○	○	○	○	○

✱7. What is one word that you would use to describe Markiplier?

✱8. Has Markiplier ever made you feel more confident or acknowledged/appreciated?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Unsure

9. If yes, can you describe this occurrence? What did he say and how did it make you feel, specifically?

✱10. In general, how do you regard Markiplier's community?

	Very Positively	Positively	Neutral	Negatively	Very Negatively
Check the answer that is the closest to your opinion.	○	○	○	○	○

Done