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“Intentional Communities, Good Vibes, Great People” A Survey of Listeners of Music and DJ Channels on Twitch during COVID

ABSTRACT

When the COVID pandemic lockdown began in March of 2020, the entire world went online to find “much-needed connection in isolation” (Lufkin 2020). Many musical acts took to ‘going live’ on Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube to provide entertainment, either formally as sponsored virtual concerts raising money for relief efforts or in the form of pop-ups from home studios. However, those platforms proved unsustainable because broadcasts would be interrupted or taken down if music that did not adhere to licensing agreements was detected (cf. Connaghan 2022). Twitch.tv proved to be more stable, though, and its chat feature allowed for greater and more direct interaction between streamer and listener.

This project is specifically focused on music lovers who tuned in to livestreams on Twitch.tv, first to listen to artists and producers they were fans of beforehand, and then, in the months and years that followed, to listen to the new musical acts (primarily DJs) they discovered along the way. My research draws from survey data collected between Aug. 13 and Sep. 19, 2025, from 184 active Twitch users, 142 of whom stated they purposefully created an account to join the platform during the pandemic after seeing their favorite performers create channels or shift their livestreaming there. Their responses illustrate the ways online communities can shape social belonging, particularly when the streamer fosters a supportive and safe space.

Awareness of the ‘Music’ and ‘DJ’ categories on Twitch, established in 2015 and 2024, respectively, is still not widespread, and scholarship remains predominately associated with gamers on the platform. Therefore, this work offers unique insight to both areas of the platform as well as underexplored demographics, with the two largest age groups represented being 45- to 54-year-olds (108 survey respondents) and 55- to 64-year-olds (40 survey respondents). The genres of music listened to in the channels where I recruited—house, disco, soul, funk, hip hop, and R&B—may skew slightly older, but the qualitative data shows that many continue to tune in post-COVID because they cannot find similar spaces in their ‘real’ communities to connect with others over music.

KEYWORDS

Twitch, COVID-19, online community, music

AUTHOR

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A Survey of Listeners of Music and DJ Channels on Twitch during COVID

Introduction

Priya Parker’s 2018 book *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters* argues that “the way a group is gathered [...] determines what happens in it and how successful it is” (xiii). She believes whenever people come together there should be a purpose to those meetings for a sense of belonging to happen. While her expertise is from the field of conflict resolution, it is applicable to studies of fandoms and online communities where connections can be fostered over a shared topic or interest. Parker’s book was published two years before the COVID-19 pandemic placed the world under strict lockdowns with ‘stay-at-home’ orders enforced alongside the extended closures of schools, entertainment venues, and nonessential businesses. However, the online spaces many people chose to frequent during that fearful time gave them the opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals and fill those empty days with structure and meaning.

Indeed, the reason I created my Twitch account in April of 2020 were the daily streams by Sophie Hawley-Weld and Tucker Halpern, also known as dance/electronic music duo Sofi Tukker, who promised, “Until we’re all free and not under house arrest anymore, we’ll do this every single day” (Speer 2020). Their choice of livestream time, 1 PM Eastern, was also strategic for a global audience: the West Coast market could tune in at 10 AM, Europe tuned in the early evening, and Asia and Australia got a late-night dance party (ibid.). With no idea how long ‘stay-at-home’ orders would extend, their streaming space evolved from a table flanked by a few plants to a room surrounded by ring lights and green curtains that functioned as green screens upon which to project visuals. They also started sharing unreleased songs they had been working on, one aptly titled “House Arrest.” The song’s music video made its debut on Jul. 10, 2020, and “is an accumulation of footage created by fans across 118 days, each snapshot showing how individuals have coped with isolation during the coronavirus pandemic” (Rose 2020). This tangible proof of a “real-time connection with an online audience” (Woodcock/Johnson 2019, 818) led the fan community, who dubbed themselves ‘The Freak Fam,’ to extend their interactions beyond the Twitch chat. A 2021 *Time* article quotes the duo commenting on the significance of these new forms of interactions with their listeners:

‘People were literally relying on this for their health. And honestly, so were we,’ Halpern says, referring to the way the livestream has anchored their days and kept their mental health in balance. ‘It was definitely counterintuitive that we felt more connected to people not actually being with them.’ (Bruner 2021)

Daily streams were accompanied by simultaneous Zoom room dance parties, and eventually additional streams were scheduled around birthdays, Halloween, and other celebrations of significance, including

an “Under the Sea” themed ‘prom’ on Sep. 26, 2020. Communicating with one another between streams also spread to social media platforms before settling on a robust and still very active Discord server.

Of most significance to my article’s focus on community building during the pandemic is Sofi Tukker’s use of the raid feature unique to Twitch that allowed the duo to take their audience to another streamer’s channel once they finished their hour-long set. Raids like these introduced listeners to countless other DJs, some professionals who headline festivals and some amateurs who have played only for online audiences. After streaming 212 consecutive days, Sofi Tukker passed their timeslot onto musical colleagues they had convinced to stream as well, including their Animal Talk label mate since 2018, LP Giobbi, and production collaborators and remixers, Bynon and Callie Reiff. Given the variety of lockdown restrictions around the world, this allowed FreakFam audiences to maintain a stable routine of real-time interaction with people they knew shared the same interests when still “isolated from those whom they did not live with [or] not able to work or engage in their other typical day-to-day activities” (Knipe 2022, 125). Now, six years later, I realize how greatly those early raids impacted my use of the platform as my time on it has only increased, with my 2025 #twitchrecap noting I visited the platform 359 distinct days and spent over 1,200 hours watching livestreams in the Music and DJ categories.

Music and DJ Categories on Twitch.tv

Though primarily associated with gaming, with the platform using game-specific directories since its launch in 2011, Twitch.tv has evolved to allow streamers to choose from designated categories, e.g. ‘IRL’ (In Real Life), ‘Music,’ ‘Esports,’ ‘Fitness & Health,’ and ‘Creative’ to organize and promote their streams. Mark R. Johnson, author of the recently published monograph *Twitch* (2024a), notes that while “Twitch remains tethered to its gaming identity” there is a variety of available content:

You might watch someone painting a painting, composing music, programming a piece of computer software, going to a restaurant with their friends and having their viewers ‘come along’ for the ride, or just talking with their viewers about what’s going on in their lives and their viewers’ lives. (Johnson 2024b)

Twitch has had the ‘Music’ category since 2015. Originally created “for musicians to use for creating, performing, and presenting original music,” the platform spokespeople made sure to encourage them to share their content and engage with their audiences “during broadcasts just like gamers do via chat participation” (Twitch Blog 2015). When the DJs in this research study turned to livestreaming on Twitch, a number that “‘has more than quadrupled’ since 2020 and the pandemic lockdowns” (Connellan 2024), they defaulted to the “Music” category and relied on tags (up to ten are available in the streamers dashboard) to provide more detail about 1) their language and location, 2) whether or not they used a microphone to communicate with their viewers, and 3) specific genres of music they were playing.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased viewership as the entire world went online to find “much-needed connection in isolation” (Lufkin 2020), with the peak statistic for the platform happening on Jun. 11, 2020, when concurrent viewers hit 6,059,527 (TwitchTracker). Listed under the header “Twitch Achievements Through the Years” at the same *TwitchTracker* link, the number of Twitch streamers also impressively grew from 49,500 average concurrent live channels in 2019 to 87,500 average concurrent live channels in 2020 (ibid.). The statistics page concluded the following



for December 2025: “around 93,200 channels are actively streaming live content” and “viewers have already watched more than 19 BILLION hours of content this year” (ibid.).

In 2024, a separate ‘DJ’ category was launched, specifically “designed for channels that stream DJ sets and is not applicable to other music uses, like that used in the background of a gaming or Just Chatting stream” (<https://www.twitch.tv/dj-signup>). Because “many DJs streaming their sets online, whether on Twitch or other platforms, have a tough time keeping their sets intact; they often face bans, muted streams, and takedowns for using copyrighted music” (Connellan 2024), this partnership evolved and now includes major labels such as Universal Music Group, Warner Music Group, Sony Music, as well as independent labels and other rights holders. Relevant to this article’s focus is the following comment from Twitch CEO Dan Clancy: “There is something special in the way DJs on Twitch introduce music to their listeners. It’s personal and it’s community-oriented, so we’ve built a stable, long-term home where they can invest in building their brand and community” (ibid.). It should also be noted that Sofi Tukker was one of the headline performers on the official category launch date of Aug. 8 and remain prominent ambassadors for the Twitch DJ program.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on the platform has focused on gaming, including studies on viewer motivations for live-stream engagement (cf. Hilvert-Bruce/Neill/Sjoblom/Hamari 2018), affective digital labor and the monetization of gameplay on Twitch (cf. Woodcock/Johnson 2019), interactive audience practices as compared to those of television broadcasts (cf. Spilker/Ask/Hansen 2020), the construction and performance of one’s streaming space (cf. Ruberg/Lark 2021), and even gamers’ strategic head turning and reading of the chat during play (cf. Reed 2024). Significant to all researchers—and the key feature that distinguishes Twitch from other streaming services—is the “participative engagement of and intense interactions between game-casters and their viewers” (Ask/Spilker/Hansen 2019).

In a compelling example of scholarship that builds upon the discussion of interactivity and examines Twitch as a gaming platform that provides both entertainment and emotional connectedness, survey participants were asked to both disclose and reflect on a difficult period in their lives (e.g., depression, mental or physical health problems, relationship issues, and/or stress) and then answer questions about their Twitch viewing behavior during that time, specifically if it was helpful (Wit/Kraan/Theeuwes 2020, 6). With many of their participants being young adults, “an age group that is characterized by several potentially impactful life changes” (ibid., 10f.), most were positive about watching Twitch during their difficult time, citing it as a good distraction, enjoyable entertainment, and a less stressful environment for social interaction. Of relevance to my study’s focus on smaller channels that helped people stay connected to people with similar musical interests are the following findings: “the streamer and their community are more important than the game that is being played,” “smaller communities [...] appear to provide more in-depth conversation and possibilities to interact with the streamer,” and “it is possible to seek out particular streamers based on one’s preferences” (ibid., 12f.).

Scholarly attention to the ‘Music’ and ‘DJ’ categories on Twitch is still not widespread; however, three recent articles have discussed the impact the pandemic had on the performing arts and how moves to online spaces cultivated new ways of performing. One example is Ng and Gamble’s (2022) study of online music production communities for *First Monday*. Reminding us of the early days of lockdown, they open their piece as follows:

[...] music industries experienced disruptions including restrictions on live performances and delays in physical distribution due to postal closures, with significant economic consequences. Creative industry personnel such as artists and event managers faced serious challenges due to strict public health regulations placed on physical congregation and travel. (Ng/Gamble 2022)

They go on to describe hip hop “producer-hosts” who relied on digital technologies such as instant messages, video call services, and livestreaming platforms like Twitch to broadcast “beat battles [...] events combining entertainment, education, and group participation among music production communities” (ibid.). Composers, songwriters, and audio engineers of all experience levels were amongst the participants who worked alongside a livestream host to take an audio sample then “manipulate and augment” (ibid.) it to make their own original composition before submitting it for live evaluation a mere one-to-two hours later. Comparing it to a televised talent show, the researchers celebrate the ways such creative expression and peer evaluation were “enabled by the participatory dynamics of Twitch and during a period of physically restricted global culture” (ibid.).

While those types of livestreams were much more dynamic than the ones described in “The ‘Lonely Raver:’ Music Livestreams during COVID-19 as a Hotline to Collective Consciousness?” (2021), Vandenberg, Berghman, and Schaap’s project similarly highlights how “(live) music can play a crucial role in [...] generating social solidarity and fostering social resilience” (141). These researchers studied the comment section of five livestreamed raves from a well-established Dutch electronic concert venue on Facebook Live between Mar. 12 and Apr. 6 of 2020, thus making their focus “virtual events when the lockdown restrictions were at their heaviest” (ibid., 145). Yet “a multitude of comments” reflected “the need to listen to this type of music physically together” consequently leaving these virtual concertgoers “only missing the real thing more” (ibid., 148). The authors surmised these laments may be specific to rave culture because of the crowd cues and types of dancing that make it more physical than live events of other musical genres, concluding that “Without the physical proximity to other bodies, collective energy seems out of reach” (ibid., 149). However, I would add the timing of the study may be a factor since, as lockdowns extended into 2021, more people became familiar with the transfer of their socialization to online platforms. Furthermore, it is not disclosed whether any of the performing artists, their support staff, or venue management at these raves were watching the live chat to interact with the audience. If not, then this would significantly limit the type of shared experience as there is a difference between commenting alongside fellow viewers in real time on platforms like Facebook and YouTube and interacting (even dialoguing) with the streamer as one can do on Twitch. Nevertheless, Vandenberg, Berghman, and Schaap’s acknowledgment that livestreams can produce new ritual activities is central to my study of music listening communities on Twitch who first found each other during the COVID pandemic and have since created strong bonds, both with one another and with the respective streamers.

Finally, Samantha Warren’s “Good Vibes Friday: Reflections on Livestreaming During the COVID-19 Lockdown” (2020) offers a DJ’s perspective on shifting her performing to a “virtual club.” It reminds readers that the pandemic closed all live venues and clubs, “wip[ing] out most full time DJs’ main revenue streams. [...] In addition, many freelance DJs fell between the cracks of the UK government’s support for the self-employed.” The article explores issues with access to equipment, time, and space as well as tensions tethered to “‘the culture of free’ on the Internet” (ibid.), citing an event on Twitch that needed to be marketed as a fundraiser rather than pay the artists themselves in order to be successful. However,



similar to the ethos of Sofi Tukker encouraging others to share their talents online and connect with new audiences, Warren states these “Good Vibes Friday DJs were happy not to get paid, saying that they were just looking forward to jamming with a bunch of other women, learning new livestreaming skills and getting the chance to play ‘in public’ which in turn would help them maintain their profile among their followers” (ibid.). Their communication with friends and fellow streamers via personal messages, coupled with interaction with ‘strangers’ in the chat, still led to a feeling of ‘togetherness’ despite it all being mediated by technology.

Methodology

My research agenda since 2005 has focused on the intersections of technology, identity, and community, particularly during times of crisis, whether that crisis takes the form of a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina (cf. Pignetti 2007) or the fracture of a fandom (cf. Pignetti 2018). Thus, as an avid Twitch user since the pandemic and current content moderator for five channels, I knew my appreciation of the platform and positive experience could not be singular. I created a 16-question Qualtrics survey to learn about the appeal of this platform, particularly the ‘real time’ enjoyment of listening to music alongside others. All collected survey responses were anonymous and no personal demographic information was collected other than the participant’s age range.

Upon receiving approval of my study from my university’s Institutional Review Board, I contacted several of the DJs I have subscribed to over the last five years to recruit members of their listening communities to participate in my survey. A chart noting their channel name, location, number of followers, and Twitch biographies that mention commonly played genres is featured in Fig. 1.

📍 Name/Country	📄 Twitch Biography	Tr Followers
DJ Kodis/France	Voted ‘Best International DJ 2025’ @ Twitch Community Awards. Full time DJ and self proclaimed Boogie King. Playing Soulful House, Jazzy Hip Hop, Funky Disco.	7,100
DJ Mark Oxford/UK & Thailand	Welcome in. I've been on Twitch 6 years now but started as club DJ in the UK back in 1990. Currently in Thailand, join me for weekly DJ sets here or IRL streams over at MarkOxfordIRL and hang with the Oxford Faculty chat fam. All Vinyl: 80s-90s alternative, Classic House and Dance anthems, 80s Soul Club Classics, 90s Hip Hop, and 80s Grand Mansion Party.	24,000
DJ Volatile/UK & Cyprus	8 X 🏆 TwitchTV Award Winner • I love Soulful music in all its forms... 20 years an international R&B, Soul, Hip-Hop and Reggae DJ • London, UK • Played with all your favourite artists • Expect sarcasm, fun and a soulful selection, old and new!	16,400
Sam Tweaks/Wales	45's spinner finding his multi-genre musical home here on Twitch. Streaming LIVE from South Wales, UK. Proud member of Global Funk Fam - Soul Train, 45 Guys, Stream Raiders & BoomBap Mondays - 2023 Vinyl Streamer of the Year (Twitch Awards)	18,400
DJP/UK	dj, producer and absurd eyewear connoisseur in east london. usually slinging funk, soul, hip hop... and saving sundays for uk garage	10,800
David C Dennis/UK	Back 2 Back raid train CEO 🏆 Twitch Community Awards Board member 🏆 & voted Best UK Streamer (2023) 🏆 South London open format DJ 🇬🇧 🇬🇪	5,700
The Nextmen/UK	Welcome to the best house party on the internet! Dom Search and Brad Baloo - aka The Nextmen - are London based, open-format DJs and producers with a deep history of mixes, albums, podcasts and international tours. Expect the very best music from the world over, all steeped in a fat dose of Hip Hop.	13,300
DashDJ/UK	In a Galaxy far far away I used to be a House DJ, Resident DJ @EGGLDN and played most the big clubs in London from 2016/2019. Lately playing house and disco on twitch.	3,500

Fig. 1: List of DJs contacted for recruiting participants

A limitation to the study was that I lacked the resources to translate the survey into other languages. I did share the survey link in Japanese streamers' chats because, over the years, I have noticed they have

plugins installed to translate all chat messages into their native language to keep a dialogue going. An oversight on my part was not asking survey participants to identify their geographic location and/or nationality, which could have provided additional information on how global the impact of Twitch was during COVID. In the interest of not collecting any identifying information other than age, my intent was to offer as anonymous a space as possible for the open-response questions that asked participants to reflect on how they felt livestreams reproduced certain aspects of offline social connections.

Results

I collected survey data from 184 active users between Aug. 13 and Sep. 19, 2025. 142 of the respondents stated that they purposefully created an account to join the Twitch platform during the COVID-19 pandemic, first to listen to artists and producers they were fans of beforehand, and then, in the months and years that followed, to listen to the new musical acts (primarily DJs) they discovered along the way via raids. Their responses illustrate the ways online communities can shape social belonging, particularly when the streamer fosters a supportive and safe space.

The following paragraphs represent the sample size, age demographics, music streaming platform preferences, and Twitch listening and chatting behaviors. I begin with the quantitative data, weave in qualitative responses from the open-ended questions whenever relevant to that data, and then ultimately focus on trends observed in the open-ended responses to answer the research question: How did Twitch function as a community-building platform for music audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and in what ways did the reciprocal interactions within Music and DJ channels contribute to the formation and long-term persistence of supportive relationships among users?

Out of the 184 participants who completed the survey, the majority (108) were in the 45 to 54 years age bracket and the second largest grouping (40) were adults 55 to 64 years old. The remaining results were as follows: 23 in the 35-44 age bracket, seven in the 25-34, five in the 65-74, and only one in the 18-24. In Jan de Wit, Alicia van der Kraan, Joep Theeuwes’ study of Twitch viewership during difficult periods in life (2020), they noted that the average age of their participants was 23 years old. Indeed, when reviewing Twitch gamer scholarship, I frequently noticed younger demographics being studied, so my research into those who turned to Twitch to listen to music during the pandemic offers unique insight to both underexplored demographics and areas of the platform. The genres of music listened to in the channels where I recruited—house, disco, soul, funk, hip hop, and R&B—may skew slightly older, but qualitative data shows that many continue to tune in post-COVID because they cannot find similar spaces to connect with others over music. As one survey participant from the 65-74 demographic shared in the open-response section:

I am older than many on Twitch—both streamers and in the general community—but having a common interest is the bond along with a similar outlook on life... personally, it positively links common interests and is a great leveler of social standing and age. It is so much harder IRL to find the same—especially as the years roll on.

Another survey participant from the 45-54 age range even declared Twitch livestreams have “replaced in-person gatherings at bars and nightclubs for me and provide music experiences that are hard to find even IRL, like themed music sets. It’s been a wonderful COVID find that keeps paying off in new music and friendships!”

To get an indication of the prominent role of music in their lives, I asked which streaming platforms they have used to listen to music, both pre- and post-pandemic. As is shown in Fig. 2, the most popular ones are YouTube, Spotify, Soundcloud, and Mixcloud:

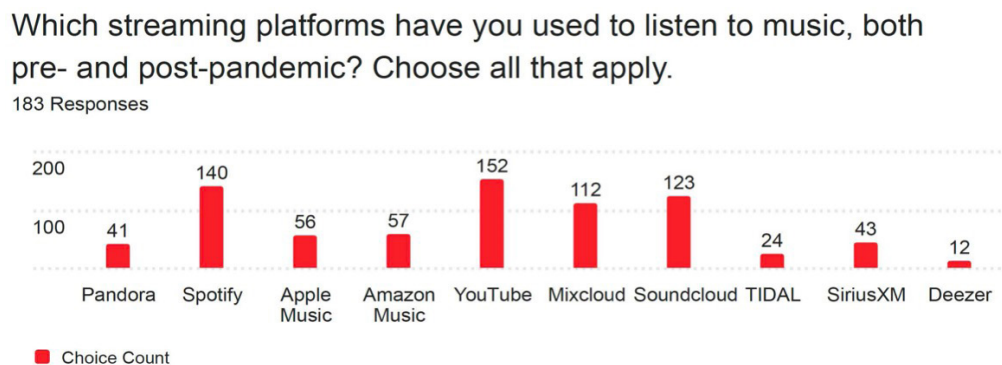


Fig. 2: Streaming platforms used for music consumption

Being the oldest of the platforms, launched in February of 2005, it makes sense for YouTube to be at the top of the list, especially given its propensity to share official and fan-created music videos, lyric videos, and live performances. YouTube livestreams of popular music festivals such as Lollapalooza, Coachella, and the Montreux Jazz Festival have grown in popularity over the years, and virtual festivals such as YouTube's #StayHome #WithMe Campaign, Global Citizen's "One World: Together at Home," and Defected Records/Glitterbox's "We Dance as One" were all hosted on the platform at the height of the pandemic.

Survey participants were allowed to choose multiple items from the list of streaming platforms, and I find it most interesting that in the results, Soundcloud and Mixcloud outperformed Apple Music and Amazon Music. The latter services, Spotify, Pandora, Tidal, SiriusXM, and Deezer, offer vast libraries of licensed, mainstream music and professional-grade podcasts, while Soundcloud and Mixcloud are platforms for user-uploaded and creator-driven content like DJ mixes and independent music. This data illustrates that these music lovers¹ are seeking a more diverse selection of songs and playlists. Indeed, on multiple occasions in the open response sections, DJs were credited with introducing listeners to new music, new genres, and different musical artists, with one respondent even saying they "fell back in love with music."

After age demographic and streaming platform preferences, the survey shifted to begin assessing the current role of Twitch in their daily lives, which was measured by asking how many streamers they listen to each week (Fig. 3) and to describe their typical participation levels in chats.

55 respondents currently listen to 1-5 streamers; however, I would argue the remaining 110 of those 167 respondents who listen to 6-25 DJs each week support my thesis that survey participants who have had accounts on the platform for nearly six years now have made Twitch a significant part of their routine, with one person stating they "still go on Twitch to hang out with friends rather than just for

¹ Regarding my usage of the term music lover instead of fan: It is important to note that this label came from the interviewees themselves. While my recruitment message used the term "music loving communities on Twitch," none of the survey questions used the term 'music lover.' However, the responses quoted throughout the results section show the respondents referring to themselves as 'music lovers' and enjoying their time on Twitch with others who shared a 'mutual love for music.' Given its usage throughout the survey responses, rather than the term fan, I felt it best represented people who turned to online spaces to listen to music and, in the case of my work, specifically created an account on Twitch to do so.



How many Twitch streamers would you say you currently listen to each week?

167 Responses

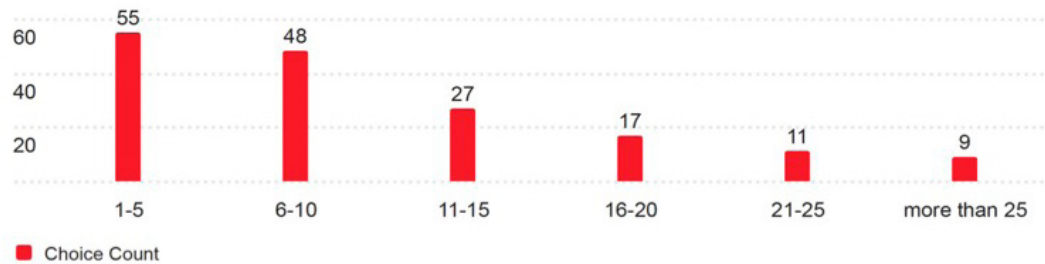


Fig. 3: Number of streamers regularly listened to according to respondents

the music.” Many dutifully follow their favorite streamers’ schedules and some further support their DJs as channel moderators who assist the streamer in welcoming new followers, posting information about the channel using various commands, and encouraging dialogue between fellow listeners in the chat.

Speaking from personal experience, these DJ numbers are quite easy to achieve on days where there are organized raid trains or “a coordinated series of raids involving multiple streamers” (What is a Twitch Raid Train 2024). For example, if you ‘ride’ the now three-time Twitch Community award-winning Soul Train raid train, held each Tuesday, you will hear one-hour-long sets from a rotating roster of 19 DJs. Admittedly, it is rare for a person to listen to, much less chat in, all 19 channels each Tuesday; however, users have been known to at least follow all the Soul Train DJs (of which there are currently 162, although nearly 300 have participated over the last five years). Some even ‘tab up’ or leave Twitch.tv open on their web browsers to show their support during the day. Returning to my opening references to Priya Parker’s advice about ways to gather that best foster a sense of belonging, London-based DJ Volatile deserves applause for organizing a raid train that, at the time of preparing this article for publication in April 2026, has run for over 271 consecutive weeks. It is this kind of longevity that has allowed a tight-knit community to flourish.

This brings me to channel size. Many of the DJs I follow range between 2,000 to 24,000 followers, but only get an average of 40-125 listeners at each stream, which is quite small in comparison to individual game channels, e.g., *League of Legends* with its 38.6 million followers, or any of the Just Chatting and IRL streams where there are often large, fast-moving chat rooms. This means the smaller communities of listeners are more familiar with each other and can use the space to chat during streams, not just reply to the streamer or react with emotes to the songs being played. This behavior is supported by the survey data (Fig. 4), with the two leading responses describing typical participation in Twitch chats as either “very active” and “talking to everyone” or “active” and “entering the chat if they know someone there.”

The other behaviors, “somewhat active...mainly replying to the streamer,” garnered 14 responses, while 15 people referred to themselves as “lurkers” or silent spectators. Five people said they used “emotes only,” meaning they participated only by using digital emojis, either default ones provided by the platform or unique channel-specific art. Of the ten who responded “Other,” a few wanted to clarify

Realizing it might vary due to time, day, and streamer, how would you describe your typical participation in Twitch chats?

168 Responses

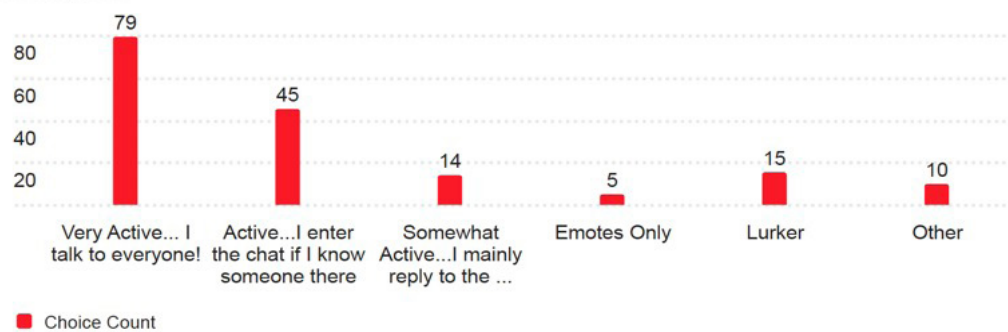


Fig. 4: Respondents' descriptions of their typical participation

that their chat style has evolved to be more of a blend of the options offered, since work and life commitments have understandably increased since lockdown restrictions lifted in 2021.

Still, the smaller channel size has allowed for a familiarity with one another as previously discussed in earlier research (cf. Wit/Kraan/Theeuwes 2020, 13). One respondent shared the following about the close-knit communities formed during the pandemic: "People shared their personal struggles as we listened to music. We learned of births, deaths, engagements, graduations and all kinds of personal events shared with the viewers and chatters in the live stream." Living through moments like these alongside one another the last five years inspired another respondent to declare, "Twitch is more of a community-driven place than my actual real-world community," meaning the "everyone is welcome" ethos has led them to continue visiting the channel and, as the majority of my respondents indicated, "talk to everyone."

Comments like these reminded me of Mallory R. Knipe's case study (2022) of the virtual fandom Sid City Social Club, dedicated to keeping fans of the Sudanese-born British actor and director Alexander Siddig (best known for his work on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* [1993-1999]) connected during the pandemic. Created as an offshoot from his official fan site that has been around since 1996, this online version featured bi-weekly Zoom meetings with Siddig, virtual pub quizzes, open chats, and "periodic 'SID' (Special Interest Discussion) Talks, where various participants presented on topics that they were knowledgeable and passionate about, including healthcare, religion, critical consciousness development and many more" (Knipe 2022, 113). Different from my research project is that this fandom was already established and had a single focus on Siddig, it is similar in how the growth of an online community during the pandemic allowed many to make solid connections when "the isolating effect of quarantine mandates left many cut off from their usual supports" (ibid., 114).

To learn more about the sense of community Twitch provided music lovers during such an uncertain time, my survey asked four open-ended questions and in reviewing the responses to them, patterns emerged. Specific to the question "Did you find Twitch to be a space for social support and connection during COVID-19 lockdown? Please share any details here about that time," Twitch was described as a "safe space," a "lifeline," and "lifesaving." For this reason, I want to begin by sharing remarks specific to the lonelier times of COVID, particularly for those who were caretakers and/or immunocompromised.



For these, and all responses to the open-ended questions that follow, each paragraph represents a different survey respondent's voice:

I worked through the pandemic as a front-line hospital worker. Twitch was honestly invaluable for me. Coming home and having other people to talk to. Being able to forget for a while just how hard work was and the abuse we got from people and patients. Twitch and the friendships made on there really was a God send.

I was completely bed bound due to a non-COVID related illness and also immunocompromised. Participating in Twitch chats for music streamers kept me sane, connected, and genuinely changed the trajectory of my post-illness life through the connections I made, and skill sets I was able to learn.

I lived alone and had a preexisting illness that forced me to be stuck at home for several weeks. Then I was sent to work during lockdown which was also lonely since everyone else was at home. Twitch connected me to people around the world, and I was able [to] meet people with shared interests. I was not lonely—I was alone with friends.

As an active concert goer who was very fearful of spreading a disease to my family, I became a shut in. Twitch helped me stay connected to not only the music scene, but to people as well.

It was an unexpected and a very much needed lifeline. There was so much fear of the unknown in 2020 with loved ones dying or seriously ill without known cures. Apart from household family who I could not burden with my concerns or person[al] fears, I bottled a lot up. The streamer I followed on Facebook originally (who then moved to Twitch) played wonderful music and the Twitchers spoke openly about the pandemic. We all supported each other in so many ways just by being there, speaking openly, sharing concerns, checking in to even see if everyone had tuned in and supported each other if anyone fell ill or lost a loved one.

I am in Canada, and as the virus spread across the UK, some [of] my friends in the Twitch community got COVID, I remember being shocked and very concerned. It was so awesome to be supporting them remotely and wishing them well. I also got COVID and everyone was so supportive. Twitch is the perfect social activity while lying in bed with zero energy while recovering. We all had various Lockdown restrictions, and it was helpful to commiserate and support everyone. Since no one could go out and socialize on the dancefloor IRL, Twitch felt like the next best thing. Plus, you could party anytime/24 hours a day, with so many wonderful friends from Australia, USA, Canada, France, etc... in your Pyjamas! This was the first social media platform I have ever met new friends in. The key was the music, since all of us love music so much. It is what brought us together and uplifted us during such uncertain times.

The interpersonal interactions described above demonstrate the extent to which Twitch was instrumental to the respondents' social interaction during lockdown and provided a supportive space to, at least momentarily, forget about the troubles of the real world. This was also illustrated in the following comments made about mental health and wellbeing:

Homeschooling three girls during the pandemic was incredibly difficult. Twitch let me connect with people in a similar situation and really was a lifesaver for my mental health.

It provided an escape through music and interactions within the chat. It resulted in improved moods, being in a happier space and being able to communicate with others going through similar or even more difficult situations. It provided an outlet and made you feel less isolated.

I found it a great way to feel normal and music makes me happy, so it helped my mental health. Interacting with others was so nice. I feel like I have a community of friends I've never met now.

I was an active club goer and supporter of my local DJs for years. When I saw on Facebook that several friends started streaming there [on Twitch], I signed up. Beyond talking to friends I already knew, I've made friends worldwide. I'm so grateful for its existence. I was feeling very alone during COVID with little contact with adults and Twitch gave me the interaction I needed to stay connected.

Being on Twitch really helps my mental health. I work from home, and although it has its benefits, it can be isolating. Twitch makes up for a lack of contact from others. There is always a friendly name in chat, happy to see you, but equally there is no pressure to engage in chat if you don't feel like it. Being a moderator has really increased my confidence as well.

During the pandemic, mental health professionals stressed the importance of relationships, connections, and community. The repeated mentions of making friends and interacting with people also going through similar situations in these responses confirm Twitch as a space for those with mutual interests to mutually benefit. In fact, Mark R. Johnson's book *Twitch* (2024a) explores the "placeness" of channels and how, unlike Instagram or Twitter, streamers offer viewers a relaxed place for "open-ended friendship, interaction and sociality rather than the advancement of a metric of follows, likes or subscriptions" (142). Related to this thinking, and of most significance to this project, are the joyful references to finding a community of people with similar musical tastes:

I really love the opportunity to hear music presented by DJs who have the same musical interests as you do. I don't want a playlist, I would rather hear theirs. Some of them are excellent and extremely entertaining and their followers are almost always very decent people brought together by their love of music and the DJ's who produce some awesome streams!!

I found the Twitch space to be very welcoming during some DJ streams. I'd never really mixed music with people I didn't really know. I felt the music helped lift my moods on days where I didn't have much connection with the outside world. Talking to random people was a new experience for me.

It has deepened my love for music and life. My entire friendship group has changed as Twitch brought me to like-minded people.

What started as a way to support local artists who couldn't play in-person became a way of meeting new artists, genres and fans across the world. Strong friendships were formed. I virtually attended a wedding and several makeshift funerals in a Twitch DJ community. We'd donate to fundraisers for each other, mail fun packages to each other, and occasionally travel many miles to meet each other.

I love meeting and talking to people and I love music. Twitch offers both these things but together. To be able to speak in real time with people from all over the world is exhilarating to me. And to share our mutual love of music! Isn't that wonderful! It's filled a social & knowledge gap in my life,



convening with music lovers and taking dives into artists & genres with which I was less familiar. And it's a comfort too in this divisive age to be among so many people—most with a creative nature I think—who clearly have hearts that are open and are troubled by the state of things in the U.S. Art opens minds—even just joining in the appreciation of it.

My aim with the survey was to give music lovers the space to reflect upon the ways Twitch allowed for greater interaction between streamer and listener, largely in part due to the frequency of streams at the height of lockdown, when in-person gatherings were prohibited. The volume of responses and those chosen above indicate that they truly did find affinity with others by participating in virtual communities.

Conclusion

Something I do not think I have stressed enough in the context of fandom studies is the fact that, unlike most online fan spaces, the common denominator for these Twitch users, including myself, is music, not a specific musician or even a single genre. As has been documented in the survey responses, DJs have introduced listeners to new music, new artists, and new genres as well as reminded them of classic tunes, specifically in the house, disco, soul, funk, hip hop, and R&B genres. While we may have joined the platform to follow a certain music producer or professional DJ during the pandemic, we discovered countless others. This means that over the last five years, we were welcomed by streamers, moderators, and fellow listeners in the chat who made the effort to “sustain the protecting, equalizing, and connecting of guests throughout the event” (Parker 2018, 97), which led to feeling a sense of belonging during an unprecedented time of isolation.

Even with the return to IRL work in clubs once lockdown restrictions lifted, many DJs who initially thought their time on Twitch would be temporary are maintaining their streaming schedules, participating on weekly raid trains, bringing their streaming equipment with them to gigs, and now organizing in-person events inspired by their livestreams, all of which is worthy of its own scholarly examination. Also worthy of future research is the small group of survey respondents who revealed they had packed away their vinyl turntables and digital controllers years ago but were inspired by Twitch DJs to bring them out again. Purchasing and setting up the additional hardware needed to stream, e.g., cameras and screen monitors, may make the hobby more expensive than before, but they admit the gain of a supportive audience and close-knit community makes it worth it, describing this pursuit “almost like a second adolescence.”

The purpose of this study was to glean insights from listeners of various Twitch Music and DJ channels, specifically to hear what this experience meant to them within the context of a global pandemic. The survey participation and detailed, oftentimes emotional responses clearly show joining this platform in 2020 made a significant impact not only on their relationship with music but on their personal lives. I have chosen to conclude with the following two reflections: “I have made/met more real-life friends through Twitch since COVID than I made in the previous twenty years” and “Unlike most people, I think of the 2020-2022 period fondly despite having extremely severe medical challenges because I had such huge social support through this group of streamers and the people in the chat.” Because lockdown prevented so many people from receiving support in their physical communities, Twitch and its emphasis on interaction allowed them to not only find comfort in music but also connect with others who could support and encourage them in their personal development.

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