

Social Anxiety And Online Validation In Link's Character In *Mainstream* (2020)

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to analyze how the character Link in *Mainstream* (2020) experienced and expressed social anxiety within the pressures of digital visibility, using Clark and Wells' cognitive model of Social Anxiety Disorder as the primary theoretical framework and the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory as the supporting framework. Clark and Wells (1995) argued that social anxiety developed through processes such as distorted self-perception, fear of negative evaluation, self-focused attention, and maladaptive safety behaviors. Meanwhile, the U&G theory explained how audiences actively sought entertainment, identity reinforcement, social interaction, and validation, which in turn shaped a content creator's behavioral patterns. This study employed a qualitative descriptive method by analyzing selected scenes, dialogue, and visual elements that illustrated Link's psychological tension and online engagement. The findings revealed that Link's social anxiety manifested through defensive speech, emotional withdrawal, exaggerated self-blame, and heightened sensitivity to public criticism. The analysis also showed that audience gratifications played a major role in influencing Link's online behavior, pushing him toward extreme actions to maintain attention and approval. Overall, the research concluded that Link's characterization reflected the destructive interaction between social anxiety and the pursuit of online validation within digital culture. These results contribute to a broader understanding of how films portray psychological vulnerability shaped by digital pressures.

Keywords: *Social Anxiety, Content Creator, Uses and Gratifications, Digital Culture, Online Validation.*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana karakter Link dalam *Mainstream* (2020) mengalami dan mengekspresikan kecemasan sosial di tengah tekanan visibilitas digital, menggunakan model kognitif Gangguan Kecemasan Sosial Clark dan Wells sebagai kerangka teoritis utama dan teori Penggunaan dan Kepuasan (Uses and Gratifications/U&G) sebagai kerangka pendukung. Clark dan Wells (1995) berpendapat bahwa kecemasan sosial berkembang melalui proses seperti persepsi diri yang terdistorsi, ketakutan akan evaluasi negatif, perhatian yang terfokus pada diri sendiri, dan perilaku keselamatan yang maladaptif. Sementara itu, teori U&G menjelaskan bagaimana audiens secara aktif mencari hiburan, penguatan identitas, interaksi sosial, dan validasi, yang pada gilirannya membentuk pola perilaku seorang kreator konten. Studi ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan menganalisis adegan, dialog, dan elemen visual terpilih yang menggambarkan ketegangan psikologis dan keterlibatan online Link. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kecemasan sosial Link termanifestasi melalui ucapan defensif, penarikan emosional,

menyalahkan diri sendiri secara berlebihan, dan peningkatan sensitivitas terhadap kritik publik. Analisis ini juga menunjukkan bahwa kepuasan audiens memainkan peran utama dalam memengaruhi perilaku online Link, mendorongnya melakukan tindakan ekstrem untuk mempertahankan perhatian dan persetujuan. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa karakterisasi Link mencerminkan interaksi destruktif antara kecemasan sosial dan pengejaran validasi online dalam budaya digital. Hasil ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih luas tentang bagaimana film menggambarkan kerentanan psikologis yang dibentuk oleh tekanan digital.

Kata kunci: Kecemasan Sosial, Pembuat Konten, Kegunaan dan Kepuasan, Budaya Digital, Validasi Online.

INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution began with the appearance of social media such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, etc. Along with its emergence, social media has brought both positive and negative impacts on people's lives. Among its positive impacts are better accessibility and more efficient communication, which contribute to its value as both a material and affective resource (Zhao et al., p.2, as cited in Van Zoonen et al., 2017). On the other hand, the widespread use of social media has also led to major changes in how people build their identity and present themselves to others. One phenomenon that has appeared alongside the development of social media is the emergence of new professions such as content creators or influencers, who are individuals that builds their image and personal branding to attract audiences through digital platforms. "Influencers are everyday people who have gained visibility by regularly creating and posting content about commercial products (for instance fashion, beauty products, gadgets and travel) and about their personal lives on social media" (Abidin, 2015, as cited in Dekavalla, 2022). These professions often seem glamorous because it linked with popularity, financial success, and social recognition. However, behind that image lies a massive psychological pressure to constantly appear happy, positive, productive, and relevant in public. Constant exposure from public judgement often triggers emotional instability and anxiety, especially when an individual's sense of self-worth starts to rely on online validation.

According to Lehto (2020), "Anxiety pushes the influencers to exceed themselves in their work all the while creating relatable social media subjects" (p. 2).

This indicates that behind seemingly alluring image of influencers, there is constant emotional pressure to meet audience expectations. YouTube is one platform that illustrates this phenomenon, where content creation is influenced by cultural expectations. “YouTube, as a highly unequal platformed media system, thrives on the economic pressures it exerts on its creators” (Rieder et al., 2023, p. 2). It demonstrates how algorithmic demands and economic competition contribute to visibility on digital platforms, in addition to creativity. As stated by Rosida and Azwar (2021), “all the activities are not as natural as it is, the works of the content creator on YouTube is an ideological cultural practice” (p. 183). In other words, creators are constantly pushed to present and idealized version of themselves in order to stay relevant within the digital capitalist system. These pressures can increase emotional vulnerability, as individuals to continuously craft an idealized version of themselves online while being observed by public.

Social anxiety is a psychological condition can be identified by an intense fear of being evaluated, judged, or negatively seen by others. According to the cognitive model proposed by Clark and Wells (1995), “SAD develops as a result of an interaction between innate behavioral predispositions and life experiences, leading individuals to perceive the social world as a dangerous one which they have little ability to navigate” (Wong et al., 2014, p. 3). In a digital culture context, individuals who rely on public exposure, such as content creators, are more vulnerable to developing social anxiety, because social media creates an environment where people are constantly exposed to public gaze, comparison, and evaluation. Life as a content creator in digital culture not only brings opportunities for popularity and income, but can also result in significant psychological pressure. Savitri (2021) states that content creators are required to be more productive and creative while producing content in order to maintain quality and increase the number of viewers and subscribers (p. 68). One of the main aspects of social anxiety is the fear of negative evaluation, which is reinforced by the constant pressure to perform well in front of an audience. The stress content creators get from producing content, maintaining audience attention, and continuously fulfilling public expectations can result in burnout and even identity crisis.

In the United States, the role of a content creator has become a highly competitive and highly commercialized profession, where individuals often work long hours, invest heavily in equipment, and change their personal lives to meet audience expectations to stay relevant. According to Michaelsen et al. (2022, as cited in Goanta & Bertaglia, 2023, p. 244), an influencer is “a content creator with a commercial intent, who builds trust and authenticity- based relationships with their audience (mainly on social media platforms) and engages online with commercial actors through different business models for monetization purposes” (p. 25). The pressure to maintain a profitable and authentic image is only increased by commercialization, which makes creators feel responsible for satisfying both financial and emotional needs. As competition grows, creators are pressured to present an idealized version of themselves to remain visible, relevant, and monetizable on the platform. As stated by Haug et al. (2024), “it serves as a stress factor, for instance, due to the pressure of gathering likes or negative comment interactions; secondly, it functions as a resource for mitigating stress” (p.7), highlighting how digital engagement can simultaneously as a burden and a coping mechanism at the same time for creators. This phenomenon demonstrates how the high-pressure environment created by digital culture can easily trigger emotional stress, self-doubt, and insecurity among content creators.

In relation to these pressures, the connection between social anxiety and digital culture can also be understood by looking at the motives that drive people to use media. According to the Uses and Gratifications theory, audiences actively use media to fulfil specific psychological and social needs. As Katz et al. (1973) explain, “They are concerned with: (1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones” (p. 510). In social media context, these needs frequently include seeking validation, maintaining social connections, shaping identity and gaining a sense of belonging. As Lehto (2022) notes, “Influencer work requires persistent monitoring of the self and can lead to a relentless circle of self-evaluation” (p. 207), showing how

digital engagement can intensify internal pressure for those who rely on audience responses.

The psychological tension created by digital culture is depicted in the film *Mainstream* (2020), especially through the character of Link. His sudden rise to online fame shows how people can rely on digital platforms to meet a variety of personal needs, such as building an identity, validation, and social connection, which are reasons that align with the Uses and Gratifications perspective. As stated by Xu et al. (2023), “Social media addiction has increasingly been a critical social problem” (p. 1), and this issue is reflected in how Link gradually becomes dependent on constant online engagement. The film carefully depicts how Link’s behavior, feelings, and sense of self-worth change in response to audience reactions, demonstrating how deeply affected he is by others’ expectations. As his popularity grows, Link increasingly depends on online attention, illustrating how the pursuit of gratifications such as approval and relevance can worsen insecurity and social anxiety.

DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the research results from the analysis of *Mainstream* (2020) using Clark and Wells’ Social Anxiety Model as the main theory and Katz’s Uses and Gratifications Theory as supporting theory. The analysis focuses on Link as an individual who faces social pressure in digital culture, leading him to construct a new identity as a content creator. Through observation of key scenes, dialogues, and screenshots, the researcher identifies how Link’s psychological condition shows symptoms of social anxiety and how his engagement with digital platforms shapes his behavior and self-perception. This chapter also explains how Link’s character is built through dialogue, appearance, actions, other characters’ reactions, and symbolic elements that form his self-image. By integrating both theories, this chapter addresses the research questions and offers a deeper understanding of Link’s psychological struggles and media-driven motivations throughout the film.

Link’s Social Anxiety

Social anxiety, a psychological state marked by tension, worry, and uneasiness, is often triggered by both internal and external pressures. In film narratives, it is used to reveal a character's vulnerabilities and inner conflicts. Lai et al. (2023, as cited in Scott et al., 2018) describe it as "the negative anxiety that individuals experience in real or imaginary social interaction situations due to the fear or apprehension of receiving negative evaluations from others" (p. 1). Likewise, You and Liu (2022) define social media pressure as factors that cause users to feel stressed (p. 6). In *Mainstream* (2020), Link's social anxiety intensifies as he becomes more exposed to public and digital attention. Understanding how these pressures influence his thoughts, emotions, and behavior is crucial for analyzing the psychological dimensions of his character, which will be examined further in the following analysis.

Frankie : "Will you just look at the comments?"

Link : "The only thing in doubt about your speech is whether it makes me want to puke or kill myself then puke. That's they signed it sincerely everyone, that's so sweet. Thank you for showing me that."

(Coppola, 2020, 00:17:04 – 00:17:28)

In this scene, Frankie urges Link to read the comments on their video, hoping he will understand the audience's reactions. Instead of responding calmly, Link reacts with sarcasm and hostility, saying the comments make him want to "puke or kill myself then puke." His exaggerated language shows how deeply sensitive he is to criticism and how he interprets audience feedback as a personal attack. This moment illustrates that online comments destabilize his sense of self rather than simply frustrate him.

According to Clark and Wells' model, fear of negative evaluation is central to social anxiety, where individuals assume others perceive them negatively. Link's reaction reflects this clearly, as he catastrophizes and treats the comments as proof of social failure. This aligns with Lopez and Polleta's (2021) statement that socially anxious individuals often try to manage impressions to avoid negative evaluation (p.

2). Link's fear-based interpretation shows he experiences online feedback as a threat to his self-worth.

His sarcasm functions as a defense mechanism that hides vulnerability while revealing his fear of judgment. By reacting with extreme negativity, he dismisses the comments before they can hurt him. His statement, "thank you for showing me that," indicates he believes the audience has confirmed his worst assumptions about himself. The film uses this moment to show that Link feels constantly at risk of humiliation and rejection.

This scene contributes to understanding Link's emotional instability throughout the film. His inability to handle feedback indicates that his identity depends heavily on positive public perception. As his social anxiety grows, the pressure of online visibility overwhelms him, leading to emotional rather than rational responses. Overall, this moment demonstrates how fear of negative evaluation shapes Link's thoughts, actions, and gradual psychological decline.

Link : "I've been getting it all wrong. I've been poisoning y'all. You can't be following me. I don't...I ain't nothing. I ain't nobody. I am no one. Like I'm no one special, man."

(Coppola, 2020, 00:27:08 – 00:27:17)

In this scene, Link reaches a breaking point and confronts his overwhelming sense of failure in front of the audience. His dialogue reflects an emotional collapse where he can no longer maintain the confident online persona he created. Instead of addressing his mistakes rationally, he turns inward and blames himself entirely. The film shows, through his tone and fragmented speech, how deeply he feels the pressure of being constantly evaluated. This moment reveals how social media functions as a "double-edged sword," offering expression and support while also intensifying emotional strain (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020, p. 80). Üztemur et al. (2025) further note that fear of negative evaluation leads users to withdraw from posting (p. 3), a pattern reflected in Link's growing avoidance and instability.

According to Clark and Wells, individuals with social anxiety tend to overestimate negative judgments from others, assuming they appear incompetent or unlikeable. Link's statements "I ain't nothing" and "I am no one" show how he imagines the audience sees him in the harshest possible way. Calling himself "poison," despite no explicit accusation, reflects the model's claim that anxious individuals rely on distorted internal assumptions. His fear of negative evaluation leads him to pre-emptively destroy his own worth before others can.

Link's words illustrate another mechanism in Clark and Wells' model: socially anxious individuals form mental images of themselves as judged or ridiculed. Rather than seeing himself as an imperfect creator, he imagines others view him as worthless. His repeated denial, "I ain't nobody," demonstrates how he internalizes the criticism he fears, even without evidence. Through this confession, the film shows how imagined judgment becomes stronger than reality, reshaping his self-perception into a punishing narrative.

This dialogue is crucial for understanding the escalation of Link's anxiety throughout the film. His fear of negative evaluation undermines his confidence and makes him dependent on public approval. When that approval falters, he immediately assumes rejection and collapses emotionally. The scene reveals how social media amplifies his anxiety by increasing his visibility and fear of judgment. By showing Link unravel under imagined criticism, the film highlights the powerful psychological impact of evaluation anxiety in digital culture.



Picture 1

(Coppola, 2020, 00:28:48-00:28:51)

At 00:28:48–00:28:51, the film shows Link sitting still with a blank expression as he prepares for his first live stream with Juanpa under the persona “No One Special.” The close-up shot highlights the tension in his eyes and stiffness in his posture, signaling the weight of the moment as he tries to hide his anxiety. Rather than showing confidence, his empty expression reflects emotional disconnection, turning the silence into a clear sign of the internal pressure he feels before entering the public spotlight.

According to Clark and Wells, socially anxious individuals direct their attention inward, becoming hyperaware of their thoughts, bodily sensations, and possible mistakes. Link’s blank stare reflects this inward focus, suggesting he is monitoring his breathing, posture, and anticipated judgment rather than preparing his message. This aligns with Jing et al. (2025), who note that heightened anxiety driven by fear of negative evaluation and the need for affirmation leads to emotional fatigue and isolation (p. 12).

By isolating Link in a silent close-up, the film visually conveys the psychological strain of performing under widespread digital scrutiny. The lack of dialogue and prolonged focus on his expression emphasize how visibility intensifies his anxiety even before the stream begins. His blank look resembles a freeze response—holding still while internally overwhelmed—and foreshadows his later emotional unraveling. Through this brief but powerful shot, the film illustrates how social media culture heightens the emotional pressure Link experiences.



Picture 2

(Coppola, 2020, 00:43:29–00:43:47)

At 00:43:29–00:43:47, Link prepares for his first on-stage appearance as the host of “Your Phone or Your Dignity.” Behind the stage, his stiff posture, tense shoulders, and heavy breathing reveal that he is overwhelmed before even stepping into the spotlight. His pale, tightened expression contrasts with the chaotic energy of the show, suggesting that he is not ready for the performance expected of him.

Link repeatedly tells Frankie, “I can’t do this,” in a shaky and urgent tone, exposing his fear of failing in front of a live audience. This repetition reflects a cognitive freeze, where intense self-doubt interrupts logical thinking and prevents him from mentally preparing. Through this brief exchange, the film shows how deeply public pressure undermines Link’s confidence.

According to Clark and Wells, socially anxious individuals direct attention inward, monitoring their bodily sensations and evaluating how they might appear to others. Link’s heavy breathing and rigid posture show that he is caught in this internal surveillance, focusing more on potential judgment than on the actual task. Figueiredo et al. (2023) explain that this inward shift “prevents individuals from noticing how others truly respond to them and increases awareness of internal information (e.g., anxiety symptoms)” (p. 17). Petrosman Adiraja and Agustina (2025) further note that digital culture intensifies this fear, as social media “exacerbates social anxiety through intense social scrutiny and pressure to present a ‘perfect image’” (p. 314). These dynamics amplify Link’s fear of humiliation, trapping him in escalating anxiety.

The film strengthens this tension through close-up shots and dim backstage lighting, emphasizing Link’s vulnerability before the performance even begins. His physical stillness and repeated words convey psychological paralysis, foreshadowing the emotional instability that follows as his digital persona grows. Overall, this scene illustrates how public visibility and the heightened scrutiny of digital fame intensifies Link’s internal fears, making anxiety a central theme in his character development.

Link : “*Stop crying. Grow up. Stop your fucking crying right now. Don't do this to me. Don't ruin this for me. Pull it together. Just stop it.*”

(Coppola, 2020, 00:57:47 – 00:57:56)

In this scene, Link lashes out at Isabelle when his anxiety and desperation finally break the surface. The pressure of declining views and the fear of disappointing his audience corner him emotionally, pushing him to react harshly. Instead of responding calmly, he shifts the blame onto Isabelle, treating her distress as a threat to the fragile online persona he has constructed. His aggressive tone “Stop crying. Don’t do this to me. Don’t ruin this for me” reveals his terror of losing control over how he is perceived. This reaction reflects symptoms of social anxiety, which include fear of interaction, physical signs such as trembling or sweating, and excessive self-consciousness due to fear of judgment (Heimberg et al., 2014; Jefferies & Ungar, 2020, as cited in Aryandari & Nashori, 2024). Li et al. (2024) further explain that socially anxious individuals experience heightened threat in situations where evaluation feels imminent. Through this confrontation, the film exposes the psychological breakdown beneath Link’s seemingly confident exterior.

According to Clark and Wells, socially anxious individuals fear negative evaluation and tend to interpret ambiguous situations as threats to their social image. Link reacts to Isabelle’s tears as if they will immediately expose him as a failure, even though no one is judging him. His panic-driven assumption that the moment will “ruin” him reflects exaggerated negative expectations, which, as Vogel et al. (2023) note, sustain social anxiety through avoidance and distorted assumptions. Link’s harsh commands are driven not by strength, but by fear; fear of losing the approval he desperately depends on.

The scene also illustrates Clark and Wells’ concept of self-focused attention. Link is not responding to Isabelle’s emotional pain; instead, he becomes consumed by how her reaction might reflect on him. He interprets her crying as evidence of his own incompetence, leading him to react with aggression as a defensive strategy. His repeated demands for her to “pull it together” reveal his need to control the situation in order to protect his perceived image. This distortion turns someone else’s distress into a perceived threat to his identity.

This moment is crucial in understanding the escalation of Link’s anxiety throughout the film. His dependence on audience validation makes him highly

sensitive to any sign of disapproval, causing him to panic when events deviate from his expectations. When faced with emotional vulnerability his own or others' he shifts quickly into defensive behavior fueled by fear rather than confidence. Digital visibility magnifies every small moment into a test he feels compelled to pass, intensifying his emotional instability.

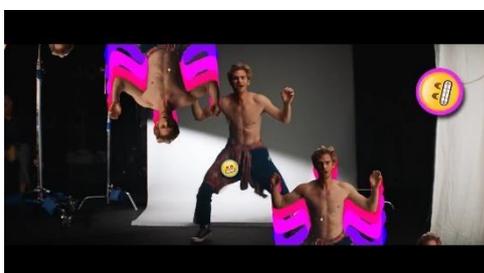
Across the scenes discussed, the film portrays Link as a character whose psychological instability deepens alongside his growing exposure to digital scrutiny. His sarcastic reactions to online comments, panic before live streams, onstage collapse, and aggressive outbursts all reflect the mechanisms proposed in Clark and Wells' model, including catastrophizing, self-focused attention, and distorted self-perception. Collectively, these symptoms construct Link as someone struggling to maintain a sense of identity under constant public judgment. He is not merely a reckless content creator—he is a young man whose anxiety erodes his self-confidence and fuels destructive emotional responses. Understanding this instability is essential for examining why he becomes increasingly reliant on digital attention for validation, which will be explored further through the Uses and Gratifications theory in the following section.

Uses and Gratifications

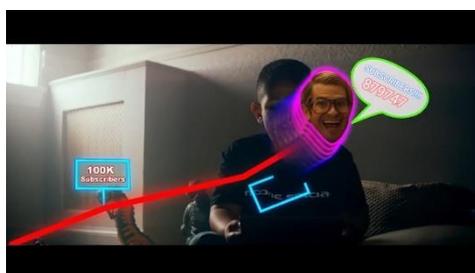
Media consumption is not passive; audiences make conscious choices based on the needs they want to fulfill. This idea forms the basis of the Uses and Gratifications approach, which emphasizes how individuals actively use media rather than simply receiving its effects. As Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974, p. 20) explain, audiences engage with media to satisfy cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension-release needs. Viewers approach media with specific motives shaped by their experiences and expectations, meaning they are purposeful and selective. Their choices reflect what they seek information, emotional support, or entertainment making Uses and Gratifications a relevant lens for analyzing how media functions in *Mainstream* (2020).

This perspective is especially important in a film centered on internet culture and digital performance. The characters in *Mainstream* (2020), as well as its fictional

audience, are not passive consumers but individuals seeking attention, connection, distraction, or validation. Katz et al.'s (1974, p. 20) explanation of audience motivations shows that media use is driven by personal goals, so each character's engagement with Link's online persona reveals what they want to fulfill. The digital world in the film reflects how modern audiences use media to shape identity, manage emotions, or find belonging. These motivations influence the characters' decisions and relationships. Through this lens, the film demonstrates how personal needs guide media consumption in a culture shaped by online visibility, making Uses and Gratifications essential to understanding why characters respond to digital content as they do.



Picture 3



Picture 4

(Coppola, 2020, 00:47:44–00:48:53)

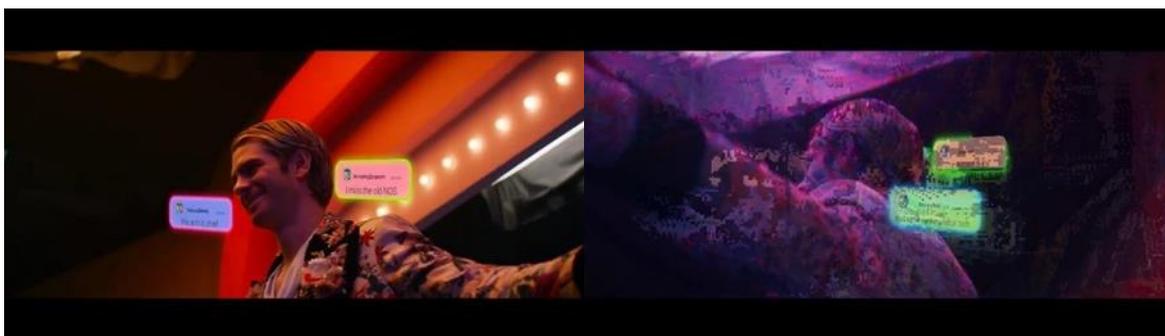
At 47:44–48:53, the scene shows Link performing increasingly extreme actions during the “No One Special” talk show and challenge segments. In this scene, he pushes himself far beyond reasonable limits, doing outrageous stunts purely for entertainment value. His movements are erratic, bold, and exaggerated, indicating that he is fully committed to capturing the audience's attention. The camera frequently cuts between Link's performance and the audience's loud, excited reactions. This creates a clear contrast between Link's desperation and the audience's enjoyment.

As Link continues performing, it becomes evident that he is willing to sacrifice his well-being, dignity, and emotional stability just to maintain popularity. The intensity of his actions illustrates that fame and online visibility have become a form of necessity for him rather than a desire. His behavior reflects what Kircaburun et al. (2020) note, that “narcissistic individuals are more addicted to social media out of

their efforts to make themselves look better than who they really are and to present better self-image” (Andreassen et al., 2017, as cited in Kircaburun et al., 2020, p. 541).

The crowd’s reactions reveal how audiences derive gratification from the spectacle. According to the Uses & Gratifications perspective, the audience fulfills needs such as entertainment, excitement, and social bonding through these performances. Their satisfaction reinforces Link’s belief that he must continue escalating his content.

This scene underscores that Link’s identity as “No One Special” is shaped not by personal desire but by audience expectations. The more the audience applauds, the more he feels compelled to push himself further, creating a cycle of dependency on digital validation. Ultimately, the scene reveals how Link becomes a product of viewer demand, sacrificing authenticity and stability to satisfy an ever-hungry audience.



Picture 5

Picture 6

(Coppola, 2020, 00:49:50–00:49:57)

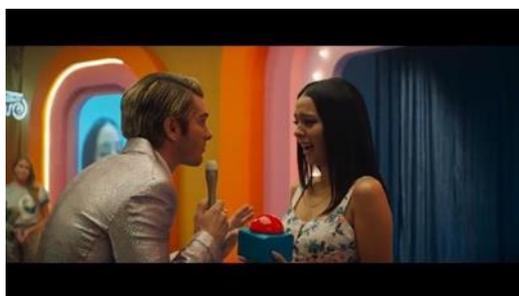
At 00:49:50–00:49:57, several negative comments appear on the No One Special channel, including “this ain't it chief,” “I miss the old NOS,” “unsubscribe,” and “find some new material bish.” These comments emerge right after Link begins shifting his performance style, becoming more eccentric and less authentic than his earlier persona. The film presents these comments through rapid, overlapping pop-ups, emphasizing how overwhelming online criticism can feel. This moment signals the beginning of a noticeable change in his mood and behavior. As Tran and Diep

(2025) note, “social media uses and gratifications, social media usage, and self-esteem are influential factors of users’ self-presentation on social media” (p. 1).

These negative comments trigger Link’s anxiety because they function as direct forms of social rejection, which Clark and Wells identify as key triggers for fear of negative evaluation. Link’s face becomes tense and unfocused, showing that he immediately internalizes the criticism. Instead of seeing the comments as feedback, he experiences them as attacks on his identity and worth. This moment illustrates how online spaces amplify social anxiety through constant, unfiltered evaluation.

The comments also reveal how deeply Link’s self-image depends on external validation. Because his identity as “No One Special” is built on audience approval, any criticism feels like a personal collapse. This dependency on audience feedback makes his identity unstable and easily disrupted. This marks a critical point where Link begins losing control over his persona and emotional balance.

After seeing the negative comments, Link becomes more aggressive, reckless, and desperate in trying to recover his declining popularity. He alters his behavior dramatically, indicating that he feels compelled to “fix” himself to regain audience approval. For Link, the criticism reinforces the belief that he must constantly escalate his performance to stay relevant. Ultimately, the scene demonstrates how digital platforms magnify insecurity and push individuals toward unstable, self-destructive choices.



Picture 7

(Coppola, 2020, 00:53:28–00:58:41)

At 00:53:28–00:58:41, the film shows Link’s distress after realizing that the popularity of his show, “Your Phone or Your Dignity,” has dropped significantly.

The decline occurs because viewers begin labeling the content as repetitive, predictable, and no longer exciting. This moment highlights the unstable nature of online fame, where engagement can rise and fall within minutes.

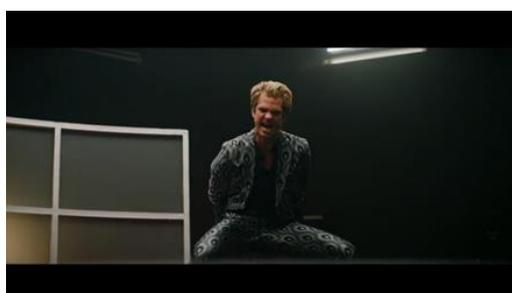
From the perspective of the Uses and Gratifications framework, the audience's declining interest reflects their unmet needs for novelty, excitement, and emotional stimulation. According to Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), audiences consume media to satisfy various needs such as entertainment, identity, and social interaction. Their boredom signals that the existing format no longer fits what they seek, pushing Link into a state of urgency.

In an attempt to regain attention, Link takes drastic action by instructing one of his followers to upload an unedited picture of himself on Instagram. His choice reflects a belief that authenticity will fulfill the viewers' desire for "realness" and novelty. As stated by Ferris et al. (2021), "being dependent on social media for personal understanding was associated with increased emotional consequences of addiction" (p. 1).

This scene also reveals how digital culture pressures creators to constantly reshape their identity to meet audience demands. Link's frantic decision-making reflects his awareness that online visibility is fragile and dependent on delivering immediate gratification. It illustrates the complex cycle where audience desire drives creator anxiety, and creator desperation fuels increasingly extreme forms of self-exposure.



Picture 8



Picture 9

(Coppola, 2020, 1:05:05–1:08:30)

At 1:05:05–1:08:30, Link appears as a guest on a podcast alongside several influential content creators. During the livestream, the discussion focuses on a leaked segment of “Your Phone or Your Dignity,” in which Link pressures a teenage fan to post an unedited photo of herself on Instagram. The atmosphere of the podcast becomes tense as the host frames the event as a moral failure and a misuse of influence. Link, meanwhile, struggles to respond confidently, showing signs of shame, fear, and confusion. This moment marks a shift from fame-driven entertainment to a confrontation with real social consequences.

From a Uses and Gratifications perspective, the controversy emerges because audiences actively interpret and judge media content based on their personal needs, values, and expectations. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) state that audiences are not passive recipients; instead, they make conscious decisions about what media to consume and how to respond to it. Their outrage reflects a need for moral reassurance and social accountability in the media they follow. As Hassaro and Chailom (2023) note, “On social aspects, the users encompass a wide range of forming and deepening social ties between users and customers...” (p. 423).

During the podcast, Link’s struggle to justify his actions reveals his inability to handle the immense pressure placed on him by both his audience and his own desire for relevance. His hesitations, defensive tone, and visible distress suggest that he did not fully consider the emotional risks involved. This aligns with U&G theory, where creators often modify their behavior to fit what they believe the audience wants, sometimes at the expense of ethical boundaries. Link’s panic indicates that he is caught between the desire to please viewers and the fear of being viewed as responsible for a tragedy.

The podcast scene highlights how digital culture creates an environment where creators are simultaneously idolized and held under intense attention. Link’s loss of control over the narrative reflects how easily public opinion can shift from admiration to condemnation. As expectations for authenticity, novelty, and ethical behavior intensify, creators like Link are pushed into extreme actions that blur the line between entertainment and exploitation. This scene therefore exposes the dark

side of digital fame, where pressure and accountability intertwine to shape a creator's public identity and psychological breakdown.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research show that Link's psychological journey in *Mainstream* (2020) is shaped by two major forces: his escalating social anxiety and his dependence on audience gratifications. The first research question, how Link experiences and expresses social anxiety as his digital visibility increases is answered through the analysis of scenes that reveal his fear of negative evaluation, self-focused attention, and cognitive distortions. His reactions to online comments, his emotional collapse during live broadcasts, and his panic before public appearances show that his sense of self becomes unstable whenever he feels watched or judged. These symptoms align closely with Clark and Wells' model, demonstrating that Link processes social interactions through fear-based assumptions rather than reality. The film portrays him as someone whose identity weakens under the persistent glare of digital scrutiny.

The second research question, how audience gratifications influence Link's online behavior and contribute to his emotional instability is reflected in the way he adjusts his persona to meet the desires of viewers. Katz's Uses and Gratifications theory helps explain how audience demands for entertainment, novelty, and authenticity push Link to escalate his content, abandon his boundaries, and engage in increasingly dangerous performance strategies. As online approval becomes a form of emotional reward, Link begins to attach his self-worth to metrics such as views, likes, and comments. This dependency drives him into reckless decisions, including exploiting fans and manipulating his image to maintain relevance. The film presents a clear cycle where audience needs shape Link's choices, and Link's desperation to fulfill these needs intensifies his psychological deterioration.

Together, these findings show that Link's downfall is not caused by social anxiety or audience gratification alone, but by the interaction between the two. His fear of negative evaluation makes him vulnerable to public judgment, while the audience's shifting expectations pressure him to continually reinvent himself. As a

result, Link becomes trapped in a system where emotional insecurity and digital performance feed into each other, leading to loss of identity, moral collapse, and severe psychological strain. *Mainstream* ultimately reveals how digital culture can push individuals toward unstable self-concepts when their value is measured through public visibility. This research highlights the complex relationship between mental health and media consumption, offering insight into how digital audiences and creators mutually shape one another in contemporary online environments.

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